United Nations A/56/PV.101

General Assembly

Fifty-sixth session

Official Records

101st plenary meeting
Monday, 17 June 2002, 10 a.m.
New York

President: Mr. Han Seung-soo ..... (Republic of Korea)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Tribute to the memory of His Excellency Sir Charles Antrobus, late Governor General of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

The President: Before we begin this meeting, it is my sad duty to pay tribute to the memory of the late Governor General of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, His Excellency Sir Charles Antrobus, who passed away recently.

On behalf of the General Assembly, I request the representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to convey our condolences to the Government and the people of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and to the bereaved family of His Excellency Sir Charles Antrobus.

I invite representatives to stand and observe a minute of silence in tribute to the memory of His Excellency Sir Charles Antrobus.

The members of the General Assembly observed a minute of silence.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

Mrs. Ferrari (Saint Vincent and the Grenadines): Mr. President, on behalf of the Government and people of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, I would like to thank you and the General Assembly for honouring and respecting our late Head of State by observing one minute's silence.

Sir Charles James Antrobus GCMG, OBE, died on 3 June 2002 at the age of 69. After a successful and distinguished career in the private sector, he was appointed Governor General in 1997 by then Prime Minister Sir James Mitchell. Sir Charles adorned the office of head of State with grace, dignity and humility. When the Government changed in March last year, it is significant that the new administration recognized that Sir Charles was the ideal head of State and was more than content to have him continue in that role.

Our late beloved head of State walked with kings but always retained his common touch and his humanity. Last Monday, 10 June, he was laid to rest after a State funeral at which I had the honour to be present. The funeral was attended by numerous heads of State and dignitaries from around the world, but also by thousands of ordinary citizens, testament to the love and respect which the people of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines had for the Governor General.

Sir Charles leaves to mourn his wife, Lady Gloria, and three children. He will be sadly missed by his family, his friends and the people of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. May he rest in peace.

Agenda item 12 (*continued*)

Report of the Economic and Social Council

Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-178. Corrections will be issued after the end of the session in a consolidated corrigendum.

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The President: The General Assembly, pursuant to resolution 56/258 of 31 January 2002, will hold the first plenary meeting of the Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development.

Also pursuant to resolution 56/258, informal panels will be held in parallel to the plenary meetings. In that connection, I should like to remind members that, as announced in the Journal today, the first informal panel will be held this afternoon from 3 to 6 p.m. in the Economic and Social Council Chamber. The second informal panel will be held tomorrow, Tuesday, 18 June, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in Conference Room 4.

I should also like to inform members that Mr. Abdul Mejid Hussein, Permanent Representative of Ethiopia to the United Nations, will chair the first informal panel. Mr. Jean-David Levitte, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations, will chair the second informal panel.

I propose that at the concluding plenary meeting, to be held tomorrow afternoon, the chairmen of the two informal panels present a summary of the discussions held in their respective panels.

I hear no objection; it is so decided.

Statement by the President

The President: It is my distinct pleasure and honour to preside over this meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development. The development of information and communication technologies (ICT) is the major trend driving the process of globalization, which, in turn, is shaping the knowledge-based economy of the twenty-first century.

The ICT revolution is creating new opportunities for economic growth and social development. ICT can make a tangible difference in the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the globe through their empowerment and thus enable them to take full advantage of the globalized world economy. New advances in the fields of ICT are further enhancing the already immense potential for dramatically accelerating development through "leap-frogging" stages of technological development.

ICT can contribute to the empowerment of women, to the reduction of gender inequalities and to the active participation of disabled and elderly persons in socio-economic life and development. It can bridge the distance between rural and urban populations and can significantly strengthen the global fight against diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, to name just a few of its potential benefits.

However, we are faced by the sad reality that this immense potential of ICT is not being adequately harnessed currently. The digital divide threatens to further marginalize the economies and peoples of the developing countries as well as of countries with economies in transition. Moreover, given the very dynamism of the ICT revolution, every day that passes without effective action further widens the divide, making the need for concerted effort by the international community a matter of utmost urgency.

At the United Nations, the urgent necessity to put the potential of ICT at the service of development for all was recognized and reflected in a number of important intergovernmental documents, in particular the ministerial declaration of the Economic and Social Council in 2000, and was subsequently endorsed by the Millennium Summit. I think we all agree that political leadership and commitment at the highest level are necessary in order to integrate ICT for development programmes into national development strategies, to create a supportive regulatory and legal environment and to build an effective matrix of international cooperation.

The full and early realization of the potential of ICT for development at the global level requires more than just coherence and leadership at the national level; it needs a broad international commitment of political leaders to act in concert, on the basis of genuine mutual interest and partnership, in building a global environment in which ICT can be made to work to promote development for all. I would like to stress that the role of the United Nations is indispensable in this.

In this regard, I am particularly grateful to His Excellency Mr. Abdoulaye Wade, President of the Republic of Senegal, for his full commitment to ICT development and his graciousness in being present at this meeting despite his pressing schedule. President Wade's speech, reflecting his vast experiences and leadership to promote ICT cooperation at both the regional and global levels, will enlighten us and set the tone for the meeting in discussing how to enhance the

role of the United Nations in employing ICT for development.

In order to ensure the effectiveness of ICT-for-development activities at the national or international level, we also must bring all relevant stakeholders together. In particular, the effective and sustainable involvement of the private sector is vital. Indeed, the private sector must play a critical role in ICT development efforts; it is an essential source of technological innovation that generates economic growth, employment and wealth creation. The private sector also has the financial and technological wherewithal to make a substantial contribution to ICT for development by forging partnerships with the public sector at both the national and international levels.

The United Nations is in a unique position to promote effectively the involvement of the private sector and of public-private partnerships to address the digital divide. A major recent practical step aimed at strengthening the United Nations system's role in bridging the digital divide, in particular by promoting involvement of all relevant stakeholders, was the establishment of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force. The Assembly will hear from its Chairman shortly. I wish to say only that we strongly believe that the Task Force, working in close cooperation with other multilateral initiatives, will be able to make an important contribution to strengthening the role of the United Nations in promoting ICT for development.

I also welcome the very valuable contribution made by the G-8 Digital Opportunities Task Force (DOT Force), set up at the Okinawa summit, and by the Genoa Plan of Action in raising awareness, in linking networks and in promoting multistakeholder initiatives. We shall also hear from the Chairman of the DOT Force at this Meeting. There has been a great deal of collaboration between those two key initiatives, which is indeed welcome.

Against the background of all the issues that I have mentioned and the many initiatives that address those issues, I see the task of this Meeting of the General Assembly and its unique value added as raising the political profile and awareness; mobilizing further support from all key partners; building on the work of the Economic and Social Council, of the United Nations ICT Task Force and of the G-8 DOT Force within an overall, comprehensive approach; and addressing the core issues in a broader context.

The General Assembly is the most universal and representative forum for evolving a meaningful, action-oriented and coordinated response by the international community to the global challenge of ICT in the service of development and thus for helping to achieve the goals of the Millennium Declaration. Our Meeting can also make a significant contribution to preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society, which is to be convened in 2003 in Switzerland and in 2005 in Tunisia. We look forward to hearing from Mr. Yoshio Utsumi, Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union, who will brief us on the Summit preparations this morning.

We have serious work ahead of us during these two days. We can make a tangible difference in the lives of people all around the globe by making our deliberations realistic and action-oriented. Our discussions should be based on genuine commonality of the interests of all stakeholders, governmental and non-governmental, who by combining their efforts can successfully bridge the digital divide.

I now give the floor to the Secretary-General.

The Secretary-General: Let me begin by congratulating you, Mr. President, and President Wade, on your very timely initiative in holding this important Meeting. I would like to thank His Excellency the President of Senegal, whose country is in charge of information and communication technologies (ICT) initiatives in the New Partnership for Africa's Development, for coming to New York to attend this meeting.

(*spoke in French*)

Your presence here, Mr. President, shows your determination, and that of Africa, to take part in the many possibilities offered by the digital revolution for the development of the continent.

(*spoke in English*)

Indeed, over the last few years, a wide consensus has emerged on the potential of information and communication technology to promote economic growth, combat poverty and facilitate the integration of developing countries into a global economy. Seizing the opportunities offered by the digital revolution is one of the most pressing challenges we face.

A great deal of work has already been done. The high-level panel of experts that the General Assembly asked me to convene three years ago has produced solid proposals and recommendations, some of which have already been implemented. The United Nations ICT Task Force, which I established last year at the request of the Economic and Social Council, is becoming a key forum for discussions on policy and, particularly, on how ICT can help to achieve the Millennium Development goals. It is also becoming a platform for forging partnerships among different stakeholders, and it is building bridges to other similar initiatives — especially, as we heard from the President of the General Assembly, the DOT Force, created by the Group of Eight (G-8) in July 2000. The Task Force itself embodies an open, inclusive approach by bringing together Government officials, non-governmental organizations, experts and the private sector.

Yet, despite commendable efforts and various initiatives, we are still very far from ensuring that the benefits of ICT are available to all. The digital divide still yawns as widely as ever, with billions of people still unconnected to a global society which, on its side, is more and more wired. Why should this be so? Allow me to make two observations which, I hope, will help this Meeting reflect on new and more effective policy approaches.

First, our efforts must be based on the real needs of those we are seeking to help. They must be fully and genuinely involved. This has proved to be more easily said than done. In particular, we must find better ways to ensure the participation of developing countries at all stages.

Secondly, our effort must be sustained over the long term. In recent years, we have witnessed a number of very promising initiatives that, regrettably, did not live up to expectations. The reasons were diverse, but one of the principal causes was insufficient long-term commitment on the part of initiators and sponsors. There is a clear lesson here for our Task Force and for other initiatives. To be effective over time, they need to be nurtured by stakeholders, supported by continued involvement and, last but not least, provided with adequate resources over the long term.

There is a real need for the many initiatives to come together, united by a common purpose and common determination. I trust that this Meeting will advance us along this route. Everyone — Governments, civil society, the private sector — has a vital stake in fostering digital opportunity and putting ICT at the service of development. I wish the Assembly a fruitful Meeting and look forward to the results of its debate.

The President: The Assembly will now hear an address by the President of the Republic of Senegal.

Mr. Abdoulaye Wade, President of the Republic of Senegal, was escorted into the General Assembly Hall.

The President: On behalf of the General Assembly, I have the honour to welcome to the United Nations His Excellency Mr. Abdoulaye Wade, President of the Republic of Senegal, and to invite him to address the Assembly.

President Wade: Let me first express once again my heartfelt gratitude for the great honour bestowed on Senegal by the President of the General Assembly's kind decision to invite me as the keynote speaker of the General Assembly Meeting on information and communications technologies for development.

I feel all the more flattered because this invitation comes from a man of vision and commitment whose outstanding qualities as a seasoned statesman, dedicated parliamentarian and bright academic have greatly benefited the work of the General Assembly during this session.

Indeed, your achievements, Sir, are no surprise to me. As an eminent citizen of the Republic of Korea, you belong to a proud nation of true achievers who have been able, within a generation, to leapfrog decades of underdevelopment to become one of the top economies in the world.

(*spoke in French*)

I should like to thank you most warmly, Mr. President, for your commendable initiative. I should like also to pay a sincere tribute to your, and our, Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan, as well as to President José María Figueres-Olsen, former head of State of Costa Rica and an outstanding figure in the development of digital technology in his country, for the decisive role they have played in the establishment and development of the study group on information and communication technologies.

The initiative of holding this meeting came from the South, which is suffering from the effects of the

"digital divide". As New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) coordinator for this extremely significant aspect of our development strategy, I am fully aware of the timeliness and the relevance of our Meeting. That is why I am particularly honoured by this invitation to address the community of nations as the keynote speaker on this subject.

The tremendous stakes involved in new information and communication technologies, which today are decisive for the progress of nations, are the reason why the New Partnership for the Development of Africa — which was adopted July last at Lusaka, at the thirty-sixth summit of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and entitled "The New African Initiative" — has made this sector one of its principal priorities.

I should like to recall that NEPAD is based on several fundamental pillars, namely, good governance; the region as a basis for development, rather than the State; and, finally, heavy reliance on the private sector.

NEPAD has chosen eight priority sectors: infrastructure, education, health care, agriculture, new information and communication technologies, energy, the environment, and market access, with the diversification of agricultural products.

Backing our appeal, Cisco, Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft, Tiscali and other titans in the new technologies sector all were heavily represented last April in Dakar at the Conference on Partnership with the Private Sector for Africa's Development, and they made clear their desire to assist Africa in its fascinating new technological adventure.

I should therefore like to recall here a few practical measures for which Africa, in the conclusions and resolutions of Dakar, requests the support of the international community. These include the establishment of Internet networks, thereby making possible the transmission of audio and visual information among the Governments of the region, or, indeed, those of the entire continent. And why not hold digital African conferences?

Other measures include harmonizing the regulatory framework for the telecommunications sector, at least in each of the regions, to facilitate foreign investment; the digitalization of Africa's cultural heritage, in particular through the production of CD-ROMs on the history of the Africa. This project, which is particularly important to me, is now being implemented in Senegal.

Another measure is the establishment of a pan-African "e-store" for trade and exchange in African products — crafts in particular — and to make e-trade the driving force for economic growth; the creation of industrial units for the production of information and telecommunications equipment; and, finally, the establishment of a global fund for information and communication technologies to assist Africa in overcoming the digital divide that separates it from the developed world.

Moreover, Africa's backwardness in this area, far from being inevitable, is now being dealt with and is on the way to being eliminated, for the struggle is well under way, as I am gratified to note. Efforts to this end are now being made to bring about this new planetary citizenship — the digital revolution.

Indeed, the entirely new system of underwater fibre-optic communication, which I launched in Senegal 28 May last, which links Europe, Africa and Asia over 28,000 kilometres, shows that our continent is indeed well on its way towards digital emancipation, since this system allows Africa to be connected, with full autonomy and at a lesser cost, to the global network.

The use of underwater digital cable de facto eliminates expensive travel through major urban centres outside the continent. It ensures autonomy, reduced costs and the linkage of users to the rest of the world. As you are aware, many African countries depend on certain European capitals to communicate even among themselves.

This technological marvel — which we inaugurated recently, was implemented in a relatively short time, several months, thanks to the involvement of companies from the South and the North — represents a specific example of new technology projects which NEPAD is striving to promote through private partnerships.

Indeed, if Africans had the same favourable conditions as other peoples, there is no question that they have all of the necessary intellectual resources to meet the challenge of an information and communication society. It is on the basis of this belief that I have decided to embark firmly on a bold policy

of development of new information and communication technology in Senegal.

I recently launched a large-scale project — Cyberville — a technological park on the outskirts of Dakar with a highly competitive telecommunications infrastructure. It is designed to host major companies working in the area of new technologies and the future start-ups of outstanding young Africans who wish to be active participants in the new economy. Here again, this is a project that was launched by the public authorities but that has become a private one, involving the private sector in Senegal and the American private sector.

The time has come for Africa to make full use of its human resources by taking advantage of the enormous potential of e-business, the spread of digital technology and the development of information technology solutions. Asian countries have succeeded in this, and they too started from circumstances similar to ours. I am therefore convinced that this can be achieved very quickly.

For its part, Senegal has had a successful initial experiment with distance medicine, which was repeated last week. Doctors in Dakar assessed via satellite the pregnancies of 60 women living in the most remote and cut-off areas of the country. Again, that took place just 72 hours ago. For these people, seeing a baby sucking its thumb in its mother's womb and understanding that abusing the mother means brutalizing the child represent a genuine social and cultural revolution. Indeed, we saw people holding their heads in their hands in astonishment.

We have had similar success in the education sector, where Microsoft has provided public schools with a free introductory programme in computing. The day care centres established under the La Case des Tout-Petits programme — my pet project — train children between the ages of 2 and 6 using modern educational games — which remain a privilege of children in developed countries. These centres use computer games to make inroads into the world of computing. This project has been adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a Universal Project.

Our planned university of the African future — a university without borders to which one does not have to travel — will provide complete, real time and carefully chosen Western university programmes via satellite. Through this programme, students will no longer have to go abroad, as their degrees will be absolutely identical — not just "equivalent" — to those issued by universities affiliated with the programme. Technological Senegal therefore wishes to gain access to the information highway instead of remaining on the periphery of the achievements of the new millennium.

There is no doubt that the new technologies suggest a higher form of democracy in which everyone moves forward at the same speed: the speed of the electron or, if you will, of the speed of light. But such democracy, accessible to all with the intelligence that is the gift of nature, can only become a reality if everyone has an opportunity to be a player in the interaction of its forces.

Our desire is shared in Africa today through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and the projects we shall be submitting to the Group of Eight as part of our partnership with the Western world which, I would like to recall, is both a public and private partnership. Among other things, Africa is indeed giving pride of place to new information and communication technologies. We have in store numerous projects that must be supported by the public sector, but which must also be a matter for the private sector. Our partnership must therefore have the goal of providing opportunities to every country and to every man and woman. To that end, our eyes should be on the enormous international differences in computer ownership. We must strive with resolve to achieve widespread access to information and communication networks.

In conclusion, I would like to make a solemn appeal to all partners: Governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, international institutions, scientific circles and all active participants in this fascinating adventure. I urge them to join their efforts with ours and with those of the international community and the Secretary-General, who has been able to endow our institutions with a soul. Nations have become scientific laboratories backed by political decisions. That is the reason why we are gradually seeing a very deep-rooted change in how these institutions are viewed throughout the world, including in Africa.

Now, we are addressing the colossal challenges posed by the digital revolution that Africa aspires to join — a continent that is standing proud because it is

able to continue to assume with dignity its role in the community of nations.

(*spoke in English*)

Bearing that in mind, I would like to join the Assembly in a toast to an enhanced partnership between the United Nations and Africa towards the full realization of the NEPAD programme, and to a fruitful meeting of the Assembly on information and communication technologies for development.

The President: On behalf of the General Assembly, I wish to thank the President of the Republic of Senegal for the statement he has just made.

In accordance with General Assembly resolution 56/281, of 1 May 2002, I now give the floor to the President of the Economic and Social Council, His Excellency Mr. Ivan Šimonović.

Mr. Šimonović (Croatia), President of the Economic and Social Council: The need for technology transfer and better access to knowledge is well documented and clear. Although knowledge and technological development are among the critical factors of economic growth and sustainable development, there is considerable concentration of knowledge, and the technologies deriving from it, in a limited number of countries. The majority of the world's population still lives in poverty and has not yet reaped the full benefits of the revolution in information and communication technologies (ICT).

The issue of ICT is not merely about the progress of information technologies. It is about structural changes happening in society as a result of such progress and, most important, the impact of those changes on people. Regardless of where we live or how we live, today, due to the process of globalization, we are influenced by the information society. Yet we are not always able to reap its benefit regionally, nationally and locally. ICT can be a powerful tool for human resources development everywhere, as will be underscored as part of the human resources development theme during the Economic and Social Council's high-level segment starting next month. The impact of ICT on jobs, health, education, commerce and much more should be beneficial to everyone. ICT is a tremendously powerful tool for helping to advance the development goals of the Millennium Declaration and of international conferences, and in overcoming disparities in development. This potential must be put to better use.

In recent years, the Economic and Social Council has accorded the highest priority to bridging the digital divide. In 2000, it adopted a major Ministerial Declaration (see E/2000/L.9) on the role of ICT in development. The Declaration proposed a range of initiatives for fostering digital opportunities. It stressed that information and communication technologies can play an important role in accelerating growth, promoting sustainable development and eradicating poverty in developing countries, and can facilitate their effective integration into the global economy. The Economic and Social Council, as a catalyst in bringing together all actors in advancing common goals for poverty eradication and development, has a clear role in integrating ICT into economic, social and environment aspects of development.

The Ministerial Declaration also called on the United Nations system and the Economic and Social Council to play a key role in promoting coherence of all efforts to expand the development impact of ICT. In response to this call, the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force was created by the Secretary-General, as he has just reminded us.

The establishment of the United Nations ICT Task Force enhanced collaboration within the United Nations system. It gave impetus to a wealth of collaborative efforts on the part of Governments, multilateral institutions, donors, the private sector, civil society and other relevant stakeholders to enhance the development impact of ICT. From the point of view of the Economic and Social Council, the Task Force was a pioneer effort. It was the first time the Council had launched such a broad-based endeavour, involving not only the United Nations system, but also Governments and the private sector, in a sustained pursuit of development goals. We will build on this experience as we take steps to further increase the impact of the Council's work. The Economic and Social Council is committed to helping the international community to address the challenge of the digital divide.

Last year, during its coordination segment, the Council further advanced the work started by the Ministerial Declaration. It reviewed the role of the United Nations in promoting access to knowledge and technology, including through partnerships. One major

contribution of the Economic and Social Council is to mobilize and coordinate the efforts of United Nations organizations in continuing to help countries to incorporate ICT and to establish ICT-specific policies towards advancing national and regional development. To this end, the Council helps agencies, funds and programmes to maintain their focus on these goals. It will keep ICT high on its agenda and will closely follow the work of the United Nations ICT Task Force.

Furthermore, many international, regional and local organizations and their partners are assisting developing countries to cope with challenges arising from the rapid progress of ICT. While many of these activities are the result of the collaborative efforts of multiple stakeholders, it is important that all parties be aware of the work of others so that every effort leads to efficient implementation and best results. In this regard, a coordination role by the Economic and Social Council is essential.

Partnership and collaboration among all stakeholders is increasingly regarded as a critical element for the achievement of development goals. For example, partnership was carried to an unprecedented level at the International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Monterrey. There, the Economic and Social Council was asked to help ensure that international organizations, civil society and the private sector stay engaged in the follow-up process.

I am confident that the World Summit for Sustainable Development will now bring the sustainability dimension of development to the focus of our international agenda. It will provide a powerful new platform for launching partnership efforts to achieve more balanced development, in which ICT should be given an important role.

Finally, the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in 2003 and in 2005, will provide a major opportunity to discuss further actions needed to bridge the digital divide and to use the full potential of ICT to reach Millennium Goals.

Knowledge is a key to development. As we speak, technology — especially ICT — is making rapid progress, while leaving the question of disparities in development unresolved. I would like to assure the Assembly that the Economic and Social Council is committed to helping the international community to address this challenge. The guiding principle of our efforts should be that development for all presupposes knowledge for all and ICT for all, without any discrimination.

I wish this meeting every success.

The President: In accordance with General Assembly resolution 56/281 of 1 May 2002, I now give the floor to the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union, Mr. Yoshio Utsumi.

Mr. Utsumi (International Telecommunication Union): It is a great honour for the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) to be invited to make a statement at a meeting of the General Assembly.

A wave of change is sweeping through the world that has come to be known as the "information society". Two years ago, people were very worried about the Y2K bug. It was feared that if computers stopped operating properly, all telecommunications would cease, trains would stop, aeroplanes might crash, people would not be able to withdraw money from their bank accounts, and so forth, and catastrophe would be inevitable. Fortunately, that did not happen, thanks to our careful planning and precautions. The ITU worked hard to tackle the problem.

The advantages and benefits that information and communication technologies (ICT) can bring in educational, commercial, medical and governmental activities are too numerous to mention; they are making the global village a reality. Yet many of the world's inhabitants are still excluded. Let us take as an example the telephone. Some 83 countries still have a teledensity below 10 lines for every 100 inhabitants; 25 countries still have a teledensity below 1 per cent. The situation is even worse with regard to Internet access. Some 61 countries have less than one Internet user for every 100 citizens.

Furthermore, services are often prohibitive to use due to high prices. A telephone call from Geneva to the United States costs less than 5 cents a minute — by using the newest technologies, it costs the same as a call to neighbouring cities in France. A call from Geneva to many parts of Africa, however, costs more than $1 per minute — 20 times as much. If the price came down, African citizens would be better able to join the world. That is a reality.

In the days of our parents, it was a luxury to have a telephone at home. But in today's world, telecommunications is a necessity. Without it, we cannot work efficiently, we cannot be part of the

modern world and we cannot participate in the benefits of a prosperous economic life. Of course, people cannot live on information alone, but it is quite obvious that, for better or for worse, human beings are now entering an age in which information-oriented activities are a major part of gross domestic product. Information is a key to competitive advantage, for both businesses and modern States.

Therefore, it becomes all the more urgent to build a basic telecommunication infrastructure in order to develop capable human resources and to make the best use of information technologies in every aspect of human activity. We must extend the benefits of information and telecommunication technologies to every citizen in the world. We must bridge the digital divide and turn it into a digital opportunity.

This, in fact, is the specific mandate of the International Telecommunication Union, which is the United Nations specialized agency responsible for telecommunications. Since its establishment in 1865, the Union has been working hard to achieve precisely that goal.

An earlier stage of economic development was the passing from an agricultural economy to an industrial one. If all countries must follow the same stages of development, the developing world would never close the gap. However, many recognize that information communication technologies may help countries to leapfrog the development process by moving directly to an information-driven society, assuming they take the proper steps. To build an information-oriented society, we do not necessarily require the preconditions that helped to create the industrial revolution, such as accumulation of wealth and the facilities for mass production. What we need today is creative individuals and a comparatively smaller investment in the information communication technologies (ICT) infrastructure. Today anyone can work and provide a product to the global market, even from a remote corner of the world, if the means of communication are readily and cheaply available.

In the information society, most of the actual work is carried out by individuals, using computers and networks, so that the power of economies of scale loses relevance. A complex distribution system, or many layers of middlemen, or a rigid hierarchical structure, would be useless — even an obstacle. Therefore, on the threshold of the information society, the developed and the developing worlds are standing at the same starting point.

There are already many success stories showing how to make the best use of information and communication technologies for development. These include the software industries of Israel, of Bangalore in India, of the Asian hubs of Hong Kong and Singapore, or even of a small mountain village of Peru that has succeeded in selling its agricultural produce to New York by e-commerce and has raised household incomes fivefold in the process.

The transformation to the information society will be every bit as profound as the movement from an agrarian to an industrial society. In the past, such changes led to winners and losers. Some countries have prospered, while others have fallen behind. It could happen again, and if we do not take any action now, existing gaps could widen. No, we must not make the same mistakes for the coming information society. By making the right decisions, world leaders must shape the direction of the information society and create a more just, prosperous and peaceful world. It will not be an easy task, but I am confident that we can work together to ensure that political leaders have a proper understanding of the information society and to establish a global strategy to create a win-win situation. This is the objective of the upcoming World Summit on the Information Society.

One example of a win-win situation may be that of establishing a competitive market for ICT. This will create new business opportunities for the developed world to sell their products and services. At the same time, higher penetration of ICT will enable the developing world to jump ahead to an information-oriented economy. Therefore, the creation of a competitive market for ICT should be pursued as a global strategy. There will be many other issues that will benefit both the developed and the developing world as a result of creating the information society.

To create a win-win situation at the Summit, it will first be necessary to elaborate a vision of the information society that will bring its positive benefits to us all. Secondly, the Summit should draw up a clear, concrete action plan for improving access to ICT that can be implemented by all stakeholders. Thirdly, the Summit should look beyond technology and focus on applications. The real goal is not to get more computers or more telephones, but rather to extend access to

information, to guarantee the right to communicate, and to focus on how ICT can be used to achieve broader social and economic goals, such as the eradication of poverty.

In order for the Summit to be a milestone in the information society, there must be a true meeting of minds, bringing together all stakeholders, from both the developed and the developing worlds. It must provide a unique opportunity for heads of State, United Nations agencies, regulators, industry leaders, non-governmental organizations and civil society to gather together and discuss all relevant issues in the information society.

It will not be an easy task to form a win-win situation for all. But I am confident that we can work together to make the Summit a success and ensure that the information society ushers in a world where information and communication technologies benefit all the world's inhabitants, help to eradicate poverty and create a more just, prosperous and peaceful world.

The President: In accordance with General Assembly resolution 56/281 of 1 May 2002, I now give the floor to the Chairman of the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, Mr. José María Figueres Olsen.

Mr. Figueres Olsen (Chairman of the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force): Mr. President, thank you for your leadership in devoting these meetings of the General Assembly to the very important and relevant topic of information technologies. Your country, the Republic of Korea, has certainly led the way in productivity, including broadband access for over 70 per cent of your country's households. And I thank President Wade of Senegal for leading the information and communication technologies (ICT) revolution within your country and, specifically, the ICT programme within the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) initiative.

Ten years ago, the West emerged from the cold war with a sense of victory and of its own invincibility, feeling that the war had been won. In reality, as the Millennium Declaration points out, the real war, the war for development, was only about to begin. If the fall of the wall at that time heralded an era of greater opportunities, the fall of the towers a short distance from here brought us a new sense of vulnerability. But with it came an opportunity to refocus our attention on the critical challenge we face today.

Through the global transformation, depending on our actions — or our lack of action — we have the possibility of advancing in the direction of the dream of a culturally rich, inclusive and sustainable world civilization but also, on the contrary, of moving in the direction of the nightmare of an impoverished, meaner and more destructive and fragmented world. All of us present here and millions around the world would, of course, rather move in the first direction. But the various pressures on the global system of today make that a much greater challenge.

Let me mention just a couple of those pressures. First, the evolution of globalization at differing speeds within nations and among nations is causing a sense of exclusion among many citizens of the world, not only in the developing nations but also within pockets of the developed nations. It is a sense not only of economic exclusion but also of a lack of political inclusion — creating the second challenge. It is that seeming lack of political representation that so many of the citizens of the world feel today. It is a lack of representation not only of peoples but also with respect to certain issues, and the third source of pressure on the global system is that markets fail to address properly what we call the common good: things of essential benefit to us all. For example, are we really addressing on a global scale the common good of the environment? Are we really addressing the issue of that common good with all the courage and proactiveness that we should employ? Thus, the fourth pressure on the global system is the seeming inadequacy of much of the world's institutional framework today in addressing our most pressing challenges.

Against that backdrop of difficulties and challenges, we have the Millennium Declaration, which reminds us of the very important challenges lying ahead. Let me reiterate just some of them — with which all are so familiar: halving the number of people who live on less than one dollar a day; providing education to children throughout the world; and enabling all people on the planet to benefit from new technologies.

We are now one seventh of the way to the date by which we agreed we should be able to achieve the Millennium goals. I submit with all due respect that in order to enhance our chances of achieving those goals,

we require a new approach due to the complex challenges and the interdependency of the issues that we face. As well, we must mainstream ICT in every one of our development efforts. To go into greater detail, such a new approach requires the collaboration of all world leaders, representing all segments of society, in addressing those global issues. More than ever, we need relevant intergovernmental organizations that can adequately transform themselves to respond to the challenges of the day. We need good, working public institutions within countries to tackle the many issues at hand. We need the thorough engagement of the private sector and a growing sense of corporate global citizenship and responsibility.

As President Wade knows so well, we have just come back from the Africa Economic Summit of the World Economic Forum, where more than 150 corporations endorsed the New Partnership for Africa's Development. Today at the United Nations, we will be discussing over lunch the CEO Charter for Digital Development, a voluntary commitment by global corporations to dedicating at least 20 per cent of their corporate social responsibility investment to ICT. Besides such private sector efforts, we also need civil society not only to identify the issues to be tackled but also to engage in solving some of them.

A true multi-stakeholder network effort, enhanced by the deployment of ICT is exactly what the Secretary-General envisioned when he established the ICT Task Force under the mandate of the Economic and Social Council. The Task Force is a collaborative effort of the public and private sectors. Many representatives of the private sector and, of course, of civil society are here today. The Task Force has four very clear objectives: to be a role model in advocacy and in creating awareness; to put the mainstreaming of ICT in development on the political agenda; to develop and to help promote national e-strategies; to assume responsibility in helping human and institutional capacity-building for mainstreaming ICT in different parts of the world; and to assist in mobilizing new resources. That would take us in the very positive direction of achieving a greater degree of sustainable development with a good, proper, sound macroeconomic balance, closely linked to strategic human development and environmental proactiveness. We can do that if we mainstream ICT in our development proposals and if we finance that mainstreaming mainly through direct foreign investment. That would put us on the path towards a "virtuous" circle, in which strengthening democratic values would lead to good governance and to institutions that work better. That in turn would help us to create better, transparent and clear regulatory frameworks within which we can generate better conditions for transforming development proposals into market opportunities — making a market opportunity out of development and leveraging all resources at hand to create a much better world.

In the meantime, as we make progress on that, perhaps we can continue to work with the Assembly on some smaller things such as changing some of the rules that have regulated the General Assembly for the past 50 years, which do not allow a *PowerPoint* presentation — which meant I had to read from my presentation instead of being able to share it directly.

The President: In accordance with General Assembly resolution 56/281 of 1 May 2002, I now give the floor to the Chairman of the Digital Opportunities Task Force and Deputy Minister for Industry of Canada, Mr. Peter Harder.

Mr. Harder (Digital Opportunity Task Force): I am honoured to take part in this meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. In my remarks, I would like to illustrate briefly the importance of ICT as a catalyst for social and economic transformation and how the Group of Eight (G-8) Digital Opportunity Task Force (DOT Force), in partnership with other international organizations, is addressing this tremendous opportunity for global development.

In today's environment, basic access to knowledge and information is becoming a prerequisite for modern human development. In that context, ICT is increasingly being recognized as much more than just a key economic sector; it is also being seen as a vital enabling tool for economic modernization and as a vehicle for social, cultural and civic enrichment.

Indeed, the debate on the importance of ICT for development has shifted away from the "either/or" dilemma. We should no longer need to ask ourselves whether it is more important to give citizens better access to computers or to antibiotics, or whether it is more important to focus on upgrading ICT infrastructures than to improve the delivery of safe drinking water. Far from competing with such policy objectives, ICT provides a powerful instrument to help

achieve them. In that context, ICT is instrumental in achieving the development goals set out by the United Nations at the 2000 Millennium Summit.

There are many real-life examples of how ICT is key to enabling societies to promote sustainable growth, to advancing social justice and to strengthening democratic governance. For instance, community radio stations in Africa are providing vital information on weather disaster warnings, on health and nutrition and on HIV/AIDS prevention. The quality of life of many poor women in Bangladesh has improved through the innovative use of cellular telephones. In Bolivia, Internet centres have been set up to provide farmers with timely information on crops, transformation and production, as well as on policies and regulations.

Unfortunately, ICT for development is still underused in many parts of the world. Indeed, the digital gap between rich and poor countries has widened dramatically in the past several years. Unequal access to ICT is producing uneven levels of participation in the networked economy and society and resulting in the inability of many to share in its benefits. Those obstacles could deepen an enormous digital divide whereby billions of people could be left outside a globally connected world.

The challenge of transforming those divides into digital opportunities for all is complex and requires commitment and close cooperation among the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. The private sector — through innovation, risk taking and investment — has a key role in developing a country's ICT infrastructure. Governments, on the other hand, are entrusted with the mandate of providing a favourable policy and regulatory environment to ensure market fairness and flexibility and of exercising leadership through strategic investments in ICT applications and content. And civil society stakeholders complement those policy objectives by facilitating the integration of a truly inclusive information society to maximize its social, civic and community potential.

A global agenda is taking shape, as numerous international forums are now addressing the challenge and the opportunity of the digital divide. Let me now spend a few moments to describe one of these initiatives, the Digital Opportunity Task Force.

As set out in the Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society, adopted by the Group of Eight (G-8) Kyushu-Okinawa summit, held in Japan in July 2000, the DOT Force was mandated to identify concrete ways to bridge the digital divide between industrialized and developing countries, and to ensure that developing countries can fully participate in the global information society. Its membership includes stakeholders from G-8 and developing countries, the private and not-for-profit sectors and international organizations associated with that enterprise.

At the Genoa Summit, held last July, G-8 leaders endorsed the DOT Force report, entitled "Digital opportunities for all: Meeting the challenge", and its forward-looking Plan of Action, with nine priority areas as a basis for developing countries to achieve sustainable, ICT-enabled development, both economic and social. G-8 leaders also encouraged all stakeholders to build on their successful cooperation and to develop concrete initiatives to deliver on each of the nine elements of the Genoa Plan of Action.

As current Chair of the G-8, Canada will present the DOT Force report card to G-8 leaders next week in Kananaskis, Alberta. It will include concrete initiatives, developed by its implementation teams, that cover the following key areas: national e-strategies; access and connectivity; human capacity; entrepreneurship; global policy participation; ICT for health; and local content and applications.

The e-strategies implementation team is viewed as a cornerstone of the Plan of Action. Among the initiatives being developed by that team is an international e-development resource network. It will provide regulatory, policy and strategy expertise to developing country policy makers in areas such as e-strategies, e-government, telecommunications policy and regulation, Internet governance and electronic commerce.

Other concrete initiatives include: a public access telecentre help desk, for sharing knowledge targeted towards not-for-profit telecentre practitioners in the South with a social agenda for community development; a DOT Force entrepreneurship network, to support entrepreneurship through mentoring, incubating and seed funding to selected entrepreneurs in developing countries; an open knowledge network, to share knowledge in various languages at local, regional and international access points; and several other initiatives, which may be described in more detail during the panel discussions.

At the Genoa Summit, G-8 leaders were also joined by African leaders, who presented an initiative that we all now know as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). That initiative includes a comprehensive vision to meet the social, political and economic challenges faced by Africa's peoples, highlighting ICT as a priority area to help all African countries to achieve economic and social development. Through its various implementation teams, the DOT Force is targeting the specific needs expressed by African leaders through NEPAD, notably the needs of the least developed countries.

In preparation for the Kananaskis Summit, the DOT Force participants met recently in Calgary to address several goals: to prepare the report card to be presented to G-8 leaders on the efforts to implement the Genoa Plan of Action; to advance the implementation of several DOT Force initiatives; to contribute to meet several of the ICT objectives set out in NEPAD by African leaders; and to ensure future implementation of the DOT Force agenda through strategic linkages with the United Nations ICT Task Force and with other international groups. Next week, on 25 June, the DOT Force will present its report card to the media, and the Prime Minister of Canada will formally present the report card to G-8 leaders in Kananaskis and will discuss the role of ICT in support of the global development agenda.

The DOT Force's all-inclusive approach is now serving as a model for other ICT-for-development initiatives by other international organizations and by the private sector. For instance, the World Economic Forum's Global Digital Divide Initiative now includes Government and civil society participants at its meetings.

As the Assembly knows, in November 2001, the Secretary-General launched the United Nations ICT Task Force to provide a focal point for addressing the digital divide within the broader international community. As with the DOT Force, the ICT Task Force includes members from all segments of global society. Given its three-year mandate, its reliance on a permanent structure and its wider international reach, it is well positioned to build on the work and success of the DOT Force and to strengthen the coalition of forces committed to promoting the role of ICT in development.

We expect that the Task Force will continue: first, to mobilize political commitment, including a commitment to mainstream ICT in development assistance programmes; secondly, to promote policy coherence and coordination among international initiatives; and thirdly, to act as a catalyst in pulling resources together on key international initiatives.

The DOT Force's momentum will also be maintained through the formation of an informal DOT Force implementation network. The network will be used to share information and to maximize cooperation among the various DOT Force implementation teams. Each team will also decide how it wants to pursue its objectives and the degree to which it will engage in formal or informal cooperation with other interested parties or entities.

Events such as the World Summit on the Information Society, scheduled to take place in 2003 and 2005, will also represent excellent opportunities to benchmark and take stock of progress in broadening digital opportunities to every community around the world.

The DOT Force ceases to exist as a formal organization at the conclusion of the G-8 Summit in Kananaskis. I am confident, however, that, through the synergies and close cooperation established with the United Nations ICT Task Force and other international bodies, we will be able to keep the drive to ensure future implementation of the DOT Force agenda in the coming years.

If representatives can bear with me for a few minutes, I will now speak in my capacity as Canada's Deputy Minister of Industry to discuss briefly the fascinating things that we have done to address the digital divide in Canada and our contribution to improving the well-being of citizens globally.

When we start to analyse the issue of the digital divide, it quickly becomes evident that there is a strong correlation with other forms of socio-economic divides. For instance, a country, regardless of its level of development, faces the following set of digital divides.

It faces a divide between individuals: rich and poor, educated and non-educated, men and women, and young and old. It faces a business divide, that is, a divide between small businesses and large businesses. Small entrepreneurs, to a large extent, do not have the resources or the capacity to use new ICT tools to

improve their business and are at a commercial disadvantage with respect to larger corporations.

There is also a digital divide between regions, especially between rural and remote and urban regions. Lack of infrastructure, lack of skilled labour, and lack of venture capital make it difficult for rural regions to compete with urban cores. There is, in addition, a serious divide between countries. It has been well publicized, and several international initiatives, such as the United Nations ICT Force and the DOT Force, are already addressing this issue.

These digital divides are not mutually exclusive, and concerted action on one type of divide will, of course, have a positive impact on the other types. Government intervention in various spheres of social and economic policy is required to address these divides.

(*spoke in French*)

For the past several years, the Canadian Government has considered its Connectedness Agenda as a top priority to ensure that Canada becomes the most connected nation in the world. Canada's Connectedness Agenda has enabled us to provide computers for schools, connecting all schools and libraries across the country, as well as thousands of communities and volunteer organizations. The focus has truly been on connecting all Canadians, regardless of status, location or economic situation.

We also have a world-leading e-commerce policy framework in such areas as privacy and security, consumer protection and taxation issues. Special attention has been paid to helping the least developed countries to use e-commerce to support connections with major corporations. We have the world's fastest national Internet system for research, and we continue to innovate, with the establishment of 12 "smart communities" across the country and the online delivery of all Government services.

(*spoke in English*)

But as we are all aware, the Information Revolution is moving faster. What were ambitious targets only a few years ago are no longer adequate to ensure Canada's success in the twenty-first century.

To reach our goals for an innovative and inclusive society in the Network Age, a public-private partnership is required on several fronts. Each of the three pillars — infrastructure, use and content — must be addressed to ensure digital opportunities for all.

We are aiming to upgrade our infrastructure to "next-generation" broadband technologies. We are aiming to accelerate use by businesses, particularly small businesses, communities, individuals and Government. With respect to content, we are aiming to increase the development of Canadian content, local content applications, services and products.

Canada's commitment to promote digital opportunity is not limited by its own borders but is truly global. Through many channels, we are sharing our domestic experience and expertise with other countries and are actively participating in building a comprehensive international strategy and action plan to help developing nations bridge the digital divide. Multilateral cooperation by Governments, the private sector, civil society and international and regional organizations is vital in building this strategy.

For instance, at the Summit of the Americas, held in Québec City last year, Canada announced a $20 million contribution to establish an Institute for Connectivity in the Americas. The Institute is implementing a work programme that is clearly demand-driven and aimed at sharing knowledge and expertise on new approaches to use ICTs for community development and delivery of Government services in areas such as health and education.

Canada is also very active in helping to design and implement connectivity initiatives in other parts of the world. The International Development Research Centre is rolling out its ACACIA Phase II programme in Africa, a very successful programme aimed at supporting African-led initiatives in policy research, regulatory frameworks, development and assessment of community-based services, and applications. The Canadian International Development Agency, an organization very well known to most of those present, I am sure, and the Canadian Department of Industry also have been very active in supporting connectivity initiatives in many countries, whether it is for connecting schools and libraries, for supporting small businesses, or for putting Government services online.

Finally, in international forums, Canada is promoting policy and regulatory frameworks that are inclusive and integrate the specific needs of developing countries. A recent example is our interventions

promoting a global policy framework for e-commerce for the benefit of all countries.

In conclusion, I should like to emphasize once again that ICTs are a strategic tool for achieving global development objectives and that Canada is truly committed to supporting international efforts to turn digital divides into digital opportunities. To do so, we all need to "mainstream" ICTs in our development agenda.

The President: Before proceeding further, I should like to inform members that, in a letter dated 10 May 2002 addressed to me, the Permanent Representative of Monaco to the United Nations, in his capacity as Chairman of the Group of Western European and Other States for the month of May, requested that the General Assembly hear in plenary meeting of the Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development a statement by the Observer of Switzerland. Taking into account the importance attached to the issue under discussion, it is proposed that the General Assembly should take a decision on this request.

May I take it that there is no objection to the proposal to hear the observer of the Holy See in plenary meeting of the Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development?

It was so decided.

The President: I should also like to inform members that, in a letter dated 7 June 2002 addressed to me, the Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations, in his capacity as Chairman of the Group of Western European and other States for the month of June, requests that the General Assembly hear in plenary meeting of the Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development, a statement by the observer of the Holy See.

Taking into account the importance attached to the issue under discussion, it is proposed that the General Assembly should take a decision on that request.

May I take it that there is no objection to the proposal to hear the observer of the Holy See in plenary meeting of the Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development?

It is so decided.

The President: Before giving the floor to the next speaker, I should like to propose that the list of speakers for the Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development be closed at 1 p.m. today. May I take it that there is no objection to this proposal?

It was so decided.

The President: I therefore request those representatives wishing to participate in the meetings to inscribe themselves as soon as possible, before 1 p.m. today.

I should also like to draw the attention of members to the matter of the length of statements. As members are aware, there is a large number of speakers on the list — at least 55 at this stage. The fact remains that we have a very limited number of plenary meetings to hear all the speakers for this Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development. Therefore, I should like to request that members try honestly to make their statements as concise as possible — not exceeding 10 minutes, at any rate — in consideration of other delegations, so that all the speakers can be accommodated within these plenary meetings. I again thank members for their understanding and cooperation.

I now give the floor to the representative of Venezuela, His Excellency Mr. Rudolf Römer, Vice-Minister for Science and Technology, who will speak on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

Mr. Römer (Venezuela) (*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of the Group of 77 and China, I would like, first at all, to express our satisfaction with this timely Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. We hope that during this special meeting we will be able to have a productive and useful exchange of views that will lead to future agreements that have political will, commonality of approach and universality of involvement with regard to this issue of such importance to the developing world.

In the Declaration of the South Summit, which was held in Havana from 10 to 14 April 2000, the

heads of State and Government of the member countries of the G77 and China indicated that today, more than ever, rapidly advancing scientific and technological developments, particularly in areas such as microelectronics, biotechnology and information technology, have a critical role in economic and social development and therefore influence all areas of human endeavour. They also recognized that ICT could become effective instrument to bring about equality in the field of economic growth and development, to narrow disparities between developed and developing countries, and to facilitate access to knowledge and education at all levels of society.

We reaffirm that Declaration today. ICT are central to the emergence of an information- and knowledge-based society and economy in the twenty-first century. The ITC revolution is truly immense and, in conjunction with the basic elements for development, has the potential to accelerate sustainable economic growth, eradicate poverty, promote sustainable development in developing countries, facilitate access to knowledge and education, empower people and local communities to realize their potential and aspirations, build capacities and reinforce informed decision-making. ICT can make a tangible and early difference in the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world, if they are used to promote the development goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration.

Our heads of State and Government also expressed their concern that the fact that developing countries have lagged far behind in knowledge generation and that the disparity between developed and developing countries in their capacity to produce scientific and technical knowledge and to utilize that knowledge in support of social and economic development has emerged as one of the major problems facing the international community. However, these are problems that have not yet been dealt with appropriately by the international community.

The deep concern of our leaders has not disappeared. On the contrary, today it is more evident than ever that the huge potential of ICT to advance development is largely eluding most developing countries. As a result, there is a growing digital divide that can become wider every passing day if it is not appropriately and immediately addressed in effective and innovative ways by Governments, multilateral institutions, the donor community, the private sector, civil society and other interested parties.

In the absence of such effective action, there is an urgent need to develop a common vision and adequate international cooperation between developed and developing countries, with the participation of all relevant stakeholders, to ensure, as stated in the Millennium Declaration, that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies, are available to all. This international cooperation is necessary to allow the information and knowledge revolution to reduce economic inequalities between the peoples, countries and regions of the world. We also believe that it is essential to develop concerted actions at the national, regional and international levels to remove impediments related to lack of infrastructure, local content, training, capacity-building, investment, connectivity, modern technology and an appropriate framework, including further development and implementation of the concepts of electronic government and electronic commerce as helpful tools for the better insertion of developing countries into the world information society.

We are convinced that ICT needs to be considered in the broader context of developing countries' overall priorities and socio-economic structures. Unless there is a common and adequate vision and timely international cooperation to bridge the digital divide, the revolution in information and communication technologies will further marginalize the economies and peoples of the majority of developing countries. That is why international actions are needed to pool resources and exchange experiences which facilitate the integration of developing countries into the new global economy and information society.

Those efforts should be geared towards facilitating access to new technologies on favourable terms, improving market access for exports from the South and enhancing capital and investment flows to developing countries on a sustainable and stable basis. To that end, multilateral development institutions and developed countries should encourage and strengthen, on concessional and preferential terms, both ICT-related investment and transfers that are applicable to local industry in developing countries. Those institutions and countries should also encourage and strengthen education and training, the development of institutional policy and appropriate frameworks, and

support for national programmes in harnessing the potential of ICT for development.

It is in that context that the Group of 77 and China are searching for concrete results in the various international initiatives that have been adopted to enhance the capacity of developing countries in taking advantage of the development opportunities presented by ITC. Those initiatives should generate adequate conditions to move towards creating an international economic environment conducive to development.

We acknowledge the efforts of the Economic and Social Council in giving priority to information and communication technologies for development and in placing ICT at the forefront of the agenda of the United Nations. The adoption of a ministerial declaration during the 2000 high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council reflects the urgent need to find effective and innovative ways to put ICT at the service of development for all.

We welcome the agreed conclusions of the 2001 coordination segment of the Economic and Social Council, which stressed the need to identify ways and means to promote and improve effective access to, and accelerated transfer from developed to developing countries of, knowledge and technology, especially ICT. Technology transfers should be adapted to the particular needs of developing countries and to their development policies, including continuing and non-formal education and distance learning, teacher training, the creation of local content, electronic commerce, telemedicine, the promotion of access to ICT and the provision of better opportunities.

Given the fact that the majority of the world's population is still living in poverty and that many people have thus not yet reaped the full benefits of ICT, the developing world is technologically dependent and vulnerable to the monopolistic pricing of technology and knowledge-based products and services, as well as to the imposition on them of technological solutions that are not appropriate to their specific problems.

In this context, the Group of 77 and China reaffirm the importance of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, which was set up in acknowledgement of the widening digital divide between developed and developing countries and the need to narrow it. We support the work that the Task Force has carried out in order to move this critical process forward. Its principal objective is to provide overall leadership to the United Nations in helping to formulate strategies for development, as well as for forging a strategic partnership between the United Nations system, private industry, financing foundations, donors and other relevant stakeholders.

We welcome the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held at Geneva in December 2003 and at Tunis in December 2005. That Summit should develop a clear statement of political will and a concrete plan of action for achieving the goals of the information society. Six themes have been proposed for the Summit: building the necessary infrastructure, opening the gates — achieving universal and equitable access to the information society, services and applications, the needs of users, developing a framework, and ICT and education. These six themes should fully reflect the aspirations of the developing countries with regard to this matter. The agendas and themes to be agreed on during the forthcoming preparatory committees and regional conferences should bring together all the challenges and opportunities of the information society and should reflect the different interests at stake, particularly those of the developing world.

In conclusion, we hope that the Group of Eight's Digital Opportunity Task Force initiative will be of benefit to all developing countries.

I would now like to make a brief statement in my capacity at Vice-Minister for Science and Technology of Venezuela.

During the past two years, Venezuela has been making a major effort to narrow the digital divide. We have raised, in various international forums, the subject of the dangers inherent in the digital divide, while on the domestic front we have made major investments to increase access to the Internet and to improve connectivity at the grass-roots level.

The efforts undertaken by the Venezuelan Government have been supported by the private sector at the national and international levels, and this has made it possible to achieve a substantial increase in access to ICT by all sectors of Venezuelan society. We note, however, that an even wider divide now exists — one that we call the "knowledge divide". We understand that this knowledge divide is related to various factors that extend far beyond digital matters

and include, inter alia, access to and quality of education, health, and productive and competitive capacity.

We had thought that ICT would be a useful way of providing people with a great deal of information that would in turn enable them to move towards development. But we now understand that if we do not use such technologies in a holistic way, incorporating them into the process of knowledge-generation at every stage — diagnosis, information, training, follow-up and so forth — the benefits tend to be lost.

Information and communication technologies provide a basic means of measuring the efforts of the Government in areas such as governance, trade, health and education. At the same time, they make it possible for us to develop more assertive policies in those areas. Through the use of ICT we are now able to assess differences among different cities and regions of the country and to provide individual solutions that ensure the inclusion of each and every Venezuelan in the socio-productive efforts of the country.

For Venezuela, inclusiveness is a fundamental pillar of the process that we call participatory democracy. Inclusiveness should not be something that each country achieves on an individual basis. Rather, as is reflected in the various documents and international agreements in this field, it should be the joint effort of all countries in the quest for the democratization of access to knowledge aimed at the attainment of equality of opportunity for all.

Mr. Nejad Hosseinian (Islamic Republic of Iran): While associating myself with the statement made by the representative of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, I would like to express, first and foremost, my deep appreciation to you, Mr. President, for your active and engaged stewardship of the work of the General Assembly, and for your comprehensive introductory statement. I commend the valuable and tireless efforts that you and various delegations made during the entire process of informal consultations leading up to this Meeting. I should also like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the Secretariat for the excellent preparations for these meetings made over such a short period of time.

This is the third consecutive year in which we have dealt with the role of information and communication technologies (ICT). This time, we are doing so in the General Assembly — the largest universal political body. If nothing else, that fact should make clear the importance of the subject to all of us, developing and developed countries. As the most universal forum, the General Assembly should prepare to evolve a comprehensive response by the international community to the global challenge of ICT with a view to serving development objectives. It is our sincere hope that this Meeting will be able to contribute significantly to the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Switzerland and Tunisia, by addressing this urgent global issue and by taking a substantive approach to all of the thematic issues of concern to developing countries.

It would be fair to say that a lot of progress has already been made, inter alia, the establishment of the ICT Task Force. We have had the opportunity in the past to present our general views on various aspects of ICT, in particular the growing digital divide. We are concerned that the divide may affect not only countries at different stages of development, but also within the urban and rural areas of individual countries, and that the nature of the problem might also shift from basic to advanced communications, and from one of quantity to one of quality.

I do not intend to repeat positions and analyses that are fully known to the United Nations Members. Instead, my delegation will emphasize some of the elements and aspects that we consider prominent and urgent for our prospective work, as also addressed in various United Nations reports.

The fact that we consider ICT as a key to our strategy for development hardly needs to be emphasized. What is at issue is the role that the United Nations system can and, in fact, should play in this context. Put into very practical terms, the question before us is how to strengthen the development role of the United Nations system and how to enhance the effectiveness of its development activities and its support for national development strategies and programmes by promoting access to and transfer of knowledge and technology. The question of building partnerships on important emerging issues also finds its place within this overall framework.

As in all other areas related to development activities of the United Nations, we are very much concerned that the resources available to the United Nations system for assisting developing countries to

meet the challenges they face in designing the policies and strategies required to bridge the technology gap between the North and the South are simply inadequate. These resources, including official development assistance, need to be expanded. We noted at Monterrey a broad-based political commitment on the issue of financing for development. It is now necessary to move from principles to concrete action and to translate the positive spirit that led to the Monterrey Consensus into meaningful implementation. It is in the spirit of that Conference that the developed countries should try to foster an enabling environment for ICT for development through fulfilling their individual commitments undertaken at the International Conference on Financing for Development.

We are, of course, very appreciative of the commendable efforts of the Economic and Social Council in placing the issue of ICT for development at the forefront of the United Nations agenda and in raising general awareness of its potential in terms of development. However, in our view, it is imperative for the United Nations and related bodies to focus their work on issues related to the transfer of knowledge and technology and to the building of necessary domestic capacities, with a view to promoting the competitiveness of developing countries. No doubt, the ICT Task Force is a good practical step in that direction.

It is now commonly felt that the need for technology transfer arises from the fact that there is a considerable concentration of knowledge, and of technologies deriving therefrom, in a limited number of countries, thus creating economic inequality. To ameliorate, if not to remove, such inequality may require an accelerated transfer of knowledge and technology, especially ICT, to developing countries — and, as everybody knows, on concessional and preferential terms, globally. Further, needless to say, for any transfer to be effective, it should be accompanied by adequate scientific capabilities and infrastructure and should be supported by the proper institutional and legal framework.

Another area of concern for us pertains to the content of, and sound and safe access to, information through ICT. With due respect to the principle of unhindered free access to information, we believe that proper attention should be paid to putting in place an appropriate regulatory and legal framework, at both the national and international levels, for providing and disseminating information over worldwide networks. Privacy needs to be protected; but equally, if not more, important are the boundaries of morality and cultural diversity cherished by different societies around the world.

Within the framework of the developing world's constant grappling and confrontation with new and emerging issues and challenges, we recognize the importance of e-commerce as a new and still unfolding channel for international trade. It is an area with far-reaching implications for our societies and economies, one in which we suffer from fundamental obstacles and shortcomings. Addressing this fact of life in our respective societies cannot be only the beginning of the process. That process should continue and be pursued with an active commitment to removing these obstacles. In this regard, we emphasize that the study process on trade-related aspects of global e-commerce should be continued.

Let me now turn to the question of partnership. As we all know, it was only during the fifty-fifth session of the General Assembly that we started dealing with this as a new agenda item, which is exactly why the discussion can still be considered to be in an exploratory stage. I should stress right now that my delegation, as a matter of principle, attaches great importance to the role and participation of stakeholders, including the private sector, in activities to achieve the goals and objectives of the United Nations. Based on that overall premise, we are well disposed and fully prepared to engage actively in a proactive and constructive dialogue with all interested partners on all aspects of this important subject. We caution, however, that any actual progress on forging partnerships should necessarily await the elaboration — and more important, the adoption — by the entire intergovernmental body, of the requisite elements and modalities for the intended and desired partnerships.

With that in mind, my delegation stands ready to contribute to collective intergovernmental endeavours towards building a common vision and realistic approaches to promoting partnerships among all stakeholders for the achievement of digital opportunities for all.

Mr. Gross (United States of America): I will be brief, but I do not want the brevity of my comments to be viewed as inconsistent with our view of the

importance of this meeting and of the topic under discussion. This is a very timely and important dialogue in which we are engaging, on the linkage of information and communication technologies (ICT) to economic development. The issue is now part of a larger global dialogue on how to encourage the use of information-based technologies to meet basic development goals and to thereby promote economic and social opportunities for all the world's inhabitants.

Remarkable strides have been made over the last two decades. For example, access to information technologies has been dramatically increasing around the world, especially in developing countries. The number of mobile telephone subscribers expanded from 491 million in 1999 — an already impressive number — to approximately 950 million by the end of 2001. That is an extraordinary increase in just two years. In addition, we should all note that Internet users in developing countries now comprise almost 20 per cent of all Internet users around the world. As the United Nations Development Programme recently stated,

> "Technology networks are transforming the traditional map of development, expanding people's horizons and creating the potential to realize in a decade progress that required generations in the past." (*Human Development Report 2001*)

Much of that growth is due to people obtaining new and better telecommunications services at much lower prices.

Progress, however, should not be an excuse for complacency. The gap between developed and developing countries persists, and we are convinced that political and economic reforms are crucial if all countries are to reap the benefits of ICT.

Policy makers worldwide recognize that the ICT sector is not only an economic engine but also an enabler of social and political progress. As President Bush said at the World Bank last year, "We have, today, the opportunity to include all the world's poor in an expanding circle of development". The United States is committed to expanding the global circle of prosperity and freedom.

Much work remains to be done in the area of building basic communications infrastructure and having the capacity to use it. How can this be done? A global consensus is emerging around four fundamental principles that form the link between ICT and development: liberalization and competition; commitment to the rule of law; private sector-led innovation; and human capacity-building.

I am encouraged by the extent to which more than 150 countries affirmed those general principles when they approved the Istanbul Plan of Action at the International Telecommunication Union's World Telecommunication Development Conference last March. The commitment to liberalization and competition in the ICT sector opens the door to productivity gains and sustainable wealth creation through increased private investment.

Clearly, the private sector has the flexibility and resources to offer innovative solutions to the unique problems facing developing countries. Governments should look for opportunities to partner with the private sector to make available the benefits of the new technologies. As a recent report of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development indicates, countries that build an environment conducive to private sector investment and that are adaptable to technological innovation experience the greatest benefits of the networked economy. For example, numerous state-of-the-art wireless and Internet protocol-based technologies are being used around the globe to provide communications to rural communities. At the same time, telemedicine applications are improving health care for millions of citizens in remote areas by giving doctors real-time access to critical medical information.

But investment funds will flow into only those economies that establish administrative and commercial institutions based on predictable and transparent rules, especially good governance. Companies, both domestic and foreign, require assurances that regulations are transparent and fair and that contracts will be enforced — in a word, that there is a sound legal basis for commercial investment.

Lastly, investment is broader than simply capital flows. It includes investment in people. ICT training and educational initiatives are the cornerstone of expanded access to and usage of information-based technologies. We are mindful of numerous local, regional and global training initiatives in which users and engineers are taught to create, operate and maintain complex communications networks. Our own

United States Telecommunications Training Institute has provided tuition-free management, policy and technical training for more than 6,000 talented professionals from around the developing world.

We have much to learn from one another. While there is no single template for achieving ICT development, we all agree that the challenge is great and that the opportunities, if we are successful, are of historic dimensions. That is why the President recently announced the Millennium Challenge Account, which is designed to help countries that govern justly to invest in their people and to encourage economic freedom. The United States will seek to support those Governments in developing countries that demonstrate a commitment to the domestic reforms that are necessary for sustained economic growth.

The progress we make will have many stops along the road. The two phases of the World Summit on the Information Society, in which Member States, the private sector and civil society will come together in 2003 and again in 2005, are two important stops on that journey.

We cannot miss this opportunity. This global dialogue is vital to everyone who wants all the world's citizens to enjoy the benefits of the information age.

Mr. Ma Songde (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): Today, when science and technology are advancing at astounding speed, information and communication technologies (ICT) have brought tremendous digital opportunities for economic and social development throughout the world. The development of the Internet and of other information infrastructures has made it possible for the information and knowledge necessary for development to spread widely and rapidly. Just as e-commerce has promoted economic globalization, e-government is helping Governments serve the public with greater openness and efficiency.

However, ICT is developing in an unbalanced way. The developed countries are taking full advantage of the immense benefits brought by the digital opportunities, while most developing countries, low-income developing countries in particular, face the ever greater challenges of the digital divide. It is significant that this meeting of the General Assembly devoted to ICT for development is being held against such a backdrop. This meeting offers an opportunity for us to give serious consideration to the question of the digital divide, to exchange views and to seek ways to bridge that divide.

I would like to make three points. First, there are deeply rooted social and economic causes underlying the digital divide. The price barrier for information products and the monopoly of certain technologies and products are major reasons for the ever growing digital divide. In fact, a very few developed countries and their multinational companies, with their powerful economies and expertise, are in control of core technologies in the field of information and communication and are setting the standards and norms in that field. Most developing countries are in danger of being marginalized in the process. Even though the prices of information technology products have been dropping, consumers still need to spend a great deal of money to keep up with the constant upgrades, thus straining the resources of developing countries.

The digital divide has a major impact on the development and stability of the world. Because information technology is a driving force behind the development of economy, education and culture, the digital divide is not only directly related to the gap between the rich and the poor today but will contribute to the widening of that gap in future generations as well, thus nullifying our tremendous efforts for sustainable development.

Secondly, international cooperation is the optimal approach to bridging the digital divide. Developing countries have a vast market potential, a wealth of human resources and low production costs. It is therefore entirely possible — indeed, imperative — to combine the market potential of the developing countries with the technology of the developed countries to jointly promote the spread and application of information technology. The developed countries should assume greater responsibilities and should offer necessary assistance to developing countries in the form of capital, technology and expertise for the construction of their information infrastructure and for the improvement of their domestic capabilities. That will not only be in the interest of the developing countries but will also open up more markets for the developed countries.

At the same time, developing countries should vigorously expand South-South cooperation in information technology, share success stories and draw on one another's experiences. We have noted that the

international community, in particular the United Nations, is undertaking efforts in that regard. The establishment of the United Nations ICT Task Force shows that the Organization is playing a positive and important role in this area.

Thirdly, as a developing country, China has also taken up the daunting challenge of the digital divide, but a sizeable gap exists between China and the developed countries. The fixed-line telephone density rate in China is only 17 per cent, as compared with more than 60 per cent in developed countries. Fully aware of the tremendous and long-term impact that the bridging of the digital divide will have on development and stability, we have increased our investment in information infrastructure under our national development strategy.

At the same time, we are actively engaged in international cooperation within the context of the United Nations. Since 2000, the Shanghai municipal government has for three consecutive years co-sponsored, with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme, the High-Level Forum on City Informatization in the Asia-Pacific Region. The Forum has provided a platform for exchanges of policies and technical cooperation among governmental decision makers at the national and municipal levels and business leaders in the Asia-Pacific region. It also offers case studies, problem-solving plans and project cooperation in order to facilitate the application of information technology.

With the support of the United Nations ICT Task Force, an Asian regional network of the Task Force has been set up in Shanghai by China, India, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum and several dozen other countries, international organizations and enterprises so as to facilitate implementation in Asia of the Task Force's plan of action.

The World Bank's *World Development Report 1998/99* says that knowledge is like light. Weightless and intangible, it can easily travel the world, enlightening the lives of people everywhere. Yet billions of people still live in the darkness of poverty unnecessarily. Although ICT has made possible the transmission of information and knowledge at the speed of light, formidable social, economic and cultural obstacles still exist. Large-scale commercial electricity grids have been operating for nearly 100 years, but one third of the world's people is still without a power supply. The telephone was invented more than a century ago, but more than one third of the world's people have still never made even one telephone call in their lives. The Internet has been in wide use for more than 10 years, but less than 10 per cent of the world's people can afford to log on to it. Science has created a great civilization in which mankind can well take pride, but enormous disparities make it difficult to achieve our lofty ideal of putting science at the service of the entire human race. It is our sincere hope that, through joint efforts by the United Nations, by Governments and by people all around the world, effective action will be taken on a global scale to bridge the knowledge divide, the technology divide and the digital divide.

Mr. Matsunami (Japan) (*spoke in Japanese; English text furnished by the delegation*): It is my pleasure to speak on behalf of the Government of Japan at this meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. Since Japan has made efforts to promote international cooperation in the area of ICT, it welcomes this opportunity to deepen the international community's discussion of that subject.

The United Nations first addressed the issue of the digital divide two years ago, when ICT became the theme of the high-level segment of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council. At the United Nations Millennium Summit, held the same year, world leaders agreed to work to ensure that the benefits of new technologies — especially information and communication technologies — were available to all. Today's meeting provides the international community with an important opportunity to pursue that objective. We appreciate the initiative to convene this meeting, taken by the President of the General Assembly, Mr. Han Seung-soo of the Republic of Korea, a country that is at the forefront in this field and that has high rates of subscription to high-speed Internet services.

The development of ICT is said to have brought about the most important structural transformation in the world since the industrial revolution. In fact, this phenomenon has come to be called the information technology revolution. The nations of the world are undertaking efforts to create an information society in which everyone receives the full benefit of ICT and to use those technologies as a basis for development.

The development of ICT is indispensable to prepare for such a society in the twenty-first century, in which information and knowledge will become a source of added value. For that reason, Japan has drastically strengthened its efforts to promote ICT in recent years. Specifically, through the collaboration of the Government and the private sector, it has established an "e-Japan" strategy and is endeavouring to realize a society in which all Japanese people can make the most of information technology.

In addition, ICT enables countries to leapfrog over earlier stages of development. A good example of that is the widespread use of cellular phones: telecommunications can be enhanced without a huge investment in telephone cables and other equipment. Countries can pursue the Millennium Development Goals — such as poverty reduction and improvements in health and education — with more effective policies when they make full use of ICT. Some developing countries have already made substantial strides in that area. In this way, ICT has the potential to contribute significantly to economic and social development.

In reality, however, it is not easy for developing countries to reap the benefits of ICT. There is a danger that those countries will not fully participate in the international information community and economy because they are unable to keep up with rapidly accelerating innovations in ICT. That is especially true when countries cannot meet the conditions of a basic economic and social infrastructure, such as electricity, telecommunications and education. The digital divide could thus result in a further widening of the economic gap between industrialized and developing countries. In order to avoid such a situation, the digital divide must be bridged and society must be transformed so that as many people as possible can benefit from the opportunities provided by such technology and so that ICT can be utilized for development.

From that perspective, Japan is pursuing the international community's common objective of making ICT available to all by tackling the digital divide. Specifically, Japan called on the international community to address this issue by introducing it at the G-8 Kyushu Okinawa Summit in 2000 and proposing the Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society. As a result, the issue of an information society was highlighted on the international agenda. On that occasion, Japan announced that it would prepare a comprehensive cooperation package for bridging the digital divide with public funding. It has implemented cooperation projects amounting to $2.2 billion, emphasizing cooperation with international organizations, including contributions to ICT funds of the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank. Japan will continue to cooperate as much as possible with countries that demonstrate ownership in this area.

In addition, Japan has proposed the Asia Broadband Programme, which aims to establish clear goals to expeditiously create a next-generation, broadband Internet environment through regional cooperation in Asia.

The private sector has taken the lead in developing and disseminating ICT. It is therefore important to make full use of the energy of the private sector in order to use ICT effectively for development. For this purpose, and as a precondition for international cooperation, the developing countries themselves need to establish an environment that is conducive to private sector activities.

In order to facilitate business and attract foreign investment, developing countries need to demonstrate ownership and work to improve the environment for business and investment. As their partners, industrialized countries, international organizations such as the United Nations and the private sector in industrialized countries should strengthen their cooperation to support such efforts by developing countries.

Mr. Utsumi, Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union, has spoken about the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in 2003 and 2005. I think that bridging the digital divide will be an important theme for that Summit, too.

Today's discussion, which is but one of the variety of efforts to bridge the digital divide, contributes to preparations for the Summit. Building upon the discussions that we will have during this meeting, as well as those conducted by the United Nations ICT Task Force and the G-8 Digital Opportunity Task Force, I would like to call on the international community to reaffirm the important role of ICT in development and to redouble its efforts to overcome the digital divide. Japan, for its part, intends to steadily promote cooperation with developing countries.

Mr. Baali (Algeria) (*spoke in French*): First of all, I should like to express my delegation's satisfaction at the very timely holding of this meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development.

This meeting provides an ideal opportunity for exchanges of views among Member States, the United Nations system and the other social actors involved on a very high-stakes issue: the bridging of the digital divide, which has compounded the North-South gap, and maximizing the possibilities provided by digital technology in the new information society.

To this end, it seems to us essential to renew the international consensus in order to achieve the objectives of the Millennium Declaration, which aim to make full use of the potential of knowledge and technology and to put it to the service of development. Indeed, technology is now experiencing very rapid progress. Major advances are being registered in the area of information and communication, which almost daily increase the possibilities for considerably speeding up development.

However, the fact that this immense potential is not equally beneficial to all in an equitable manner is likely further to marginalize the economies and populations of the majority of developing countries or to irrevocably exclude them from the benefits and gains of science and technology.

Here we deem it urgent to find effective and innovative means for putting that potential to the service of development for all. In particular, this should involve the identification and elimination of obstacles and those unjustifiable limitations that are hampering the access of developing countries to technology and therefore are the focus of our meeting.

Our Assembly thus is called upon at this meeting to consider all of the relevant issues raised by the advent of an information society and therefore to elaborate a comprehensive vision and a shared interpretation of the objectives and challenges involved.

This is all the more critical given the fact that, at the present time, a considerable number of the inhabitants of our planet are not participating in the information society because of difficulties in accessing information technologies. Even more seriously, other inequalities are emerging daily along with that disparity in access to new information technology, and they are exacerbating existing ones involving income, level of education, vulnerability, and geographical and social isolation.

We must therefore remain vigilant regarding this digital divide, which is continuing to give rise to a new type of exclusion, in particular in the area of access to knowledge.

It is clear that technological knowledge and development are requirements for economic growth and sustainable development. While there is a strong concentration of knowledge and technology in a limited number of countries, the majority of the world's population continues to live in poverty. Many have not benefited in any way from those advantages emanating from the revolution that has taken place in the area of information and communication technologies. As a result, most of the developing countries now face technological dependency and have technologies imposed on them that are not adapted either to their particular problems or to their specific needs.

Information and communication technologies are a pivotal factor in the establishment of a global economy characterized by accelerated growth, sustainable development, the eradication of poverty and better integration of all countries into economic networks.

The pace of globalization depends to a large extent on advances in science and technology. The developing countries should benefit from these advances in an adequate and satisfactory manner, with the assistance of the international community, so that they can obtain the scientific and technological knowledge they need as well as the practical skills and institutional arrangements linked to the management of technology.

Developing countries are aware of the urgent need to strengthen their national capacities in order to make possible the establishment of an appropriate structure for external initiatives aimed at developing the use of information and communication technologies. Algeria believes that this should include the formulation of strategic and sectoral policies in this field, as well as exploring opportunities for introducing and spreading ICT in sectors that can put it into use immediately, such as the trade and health sectors.

The development community and the private sector can support the establishment of specific programmes at the local, national and regional levels to ensure the digital inclusion of the most disadvantaged countries. In this connection, the New Partnership for Africa's Development could serve as a pilot project to bring about such inclusion. The players involved in the establishment of that African initiative have every possible chance to utilize this opportunity to highlight the decisive role of ICT in development.

For their part, the organizations of the United Nations system have a role to play; that of a critical and decisive catalyst with regard to access to technology and technology transfers through the establishment of partnerships likely to contribute to global development in a constructive and meaningful manner. The United Nations in particular must play a leading role to help formulate development strategies for information and communication technologies and to provide the international dimension necessary for efforts to bridge the global digital divide, in order to use digital technologies to realize the Millennium Development Goals.

Mr. Yang Seung-tack (Republic of Korea): I am very honoured to be here addressing this meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. This meeting could not be timelier, as it brings together the leaders of the world at a time of intense growth in the digital divide. In this respect, I would like to express my gratitude to the President, Han Seung-soo, whose unwavering dedication made this meeting possible. Today, on behalf of the Republic of Korea, I have the privilege to describe to the Assembly the informatization process in Korea.

As some members may well know, Korea has its own share of forlorn memories. As recently as the early 1980s, Korea's penetration rate for fixed-line telephones stood at a mere 7 per cent. That was not surprising in a country that caught the last ride to industrialization and that, consequently, did not have much of an infrastructure. Nevertheless, a common understanding was formed among the Korean people that even though they were late in industrialization, they would not allow themselves to repeat the same mistakes in informatization. With this fervent determination resounding in every corner of Korean society, the Korean Government made an all-out effort to nurture the ICT sector and to digitize the nation.

Today I can say with strong conviction that the effort was not been made in vain. Korea now has the most advanced wired and wireless information communication infrastructure in the world, and has emerged as the global leader in ICT. Korea's fixed-line telephone penetration rate currently stands at over 50 per cent, and 63 per cent of its total population — which amounts to 30 million people — has subscribed to code division multiple access (CDMA) mobile services. But Korea's aim was no longer to follow but to excel. We therefore wasted no time in moving to the next generation of mobile communication technology, an effort that was rewarded in full when Korea became the first country in the world to start the third generation of mobile communication services.

At present, just one and half years since the launch of the service, there are over 7 million mobile Internet subscribers using third-generation services. More than 50 per cent of Koreans now utilize the Internet in their everyday lives, and 8.5 million Korean households are connected to broadband Internet at a minimum of 1 megabit per second. By the end of this year the number of such households is expected to increase even further, to 10 million, which implies that 80 per cent of all households will be connected to the broadband network. In March 2002, the Korean Government declared that broadband Internet service would become a universal service for the Korean people. These facts will permit Korea to be recognized as one of countries to have reached the highest level of informatization.

The significance of Korea's success does not reside solely in the fact that it was achieved in such a short period of time. What is of rather more consequence is that it has provided Korea with extremely fertile soil in which the seeds of knowledge-based industry can be sown. In fact, Korea's ICT industry has been enjoying fertile ground for quite some time and has thus been able to emerge as the main pillar of the Korean economy, accounting for 13 per cent of gross domestic product and 25 per cent of total export volume. At this point, it may be worth mentioning briefly how Korea came to achieve such success.

In 1995 Korea enacted its basic law on informatization promotion; and in 1996 established an informatization promotion fund. In 1997 Korea formed the first inter-ministerial informatization strategy council, which is chaired by the President himself. This

allowed the various agencies and ministries to coordinate their respective informatization policies.

The first success factor was the strong will and clear vision of President Kim Dae-jung and the comprehensive informatization promotion plan that was devised to realize the vision and the will of the President. Furthermore, in 1999 Korea implemented the Cyber-Korea 21 initiative. Korea was thus equipped with the necessary laws, funds, organizations and programmes.

The second success factor was the Internet training programme Korea provided to eliminate the digital divide between socio-economic classes and between regions. Such training of the general population is extremely valuable, as it creates market demand. Therefore, the Korean Government placed great emphasis on creating Internet-friendly classrooms at every level of schooling by connecting to broadband Internet services free of charge. On top of that, Korea offered Internet and computer literacy programmes that targeted 10 million Koreans, including housewives, military personnel, the physically challenged and even inmates in prisons and juvenile correction centres. That resulted in creating a wide base for informatization, thereby generating a huge demand for ICT.

The third factor that contributed to Korea's success was the introduction of competition in the telecommunications market. Due to the competitive market environment, service providers had little choice but to maintain very low telecommunications tariffs. As low tariffs attracted an enormous number of subscribers and created still more demand, a "virtuous circle" in broadband internet services was created.

The fourth factor — and one of the most important — was the development of a human pool and of core information and communication technologies. Korea made an investment not only in technological development but also in human development to prepare for future ICT growth. As the Government and the private sector became united in a common objective, Korea was able to develop and commercialize strategically important information and communication technologies.

As a result of such efforts, Korea was able to take on the world with such market-leading ICT products as CDMA products, memory chips, thin-film transistor liquid crystal displays, broadband Internet and related equipment, satellite transmission equipment and digital television.

I am one of the many fortunate people who had the opportunity to participate in transforming Korea from a poverty-stricken nation to the leader in global ICT. I thus believe that I am in a better position than most to understand the difficulties faced by many nations. I consider it fortunate, therefore, that the United Nations has rolled up its sleeves with a view to tackling this issue. The United Nations has established an ICT Task Force to meet the challenges presented by the growing digital divide. Furthermore, the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society will be held next year. All of these efforts are sure to alleviate some of the problems resulting from the digital divide. I hope in particular that the meetings of the World Summit, to be held in 2003 and 2005, will prove to be fruitful gatherings at which tangible cooperation for addressing the digital divide can be defined.

There must be millions of ways to support developing nations in their struggle for informatization. But in providing such support, we must keep in mind that it is better to teach a hungry person how to catch fish, rather than just to hand him a fish. I believe that the Korean experience could prove to be very useful for nations that are going through the process of informatization. Korea is willing to share its hard-earned know-how and experience with nations in need.

Korea has already taken up the cause of bridging the digital divide. In November 2000, President Kim Dae-jung proposed a special initiative for Asian cooperation in order to resolve digital divide issues, and this has become a guideline in Korea's quest to bridge the digital divide. At the same time, Korea is a founding member of the Development Gateway Foundation, which was established by the World Bank in an effort to close the digital gap.

In addition, since 1991, Korea has trained over 1,500 talented ICT personnel from developing nations as a part of the effort to share the Korean experience and encourage telecommunications expertise in those nations. Since the beginning of the 1990s, Korea has sent 250 information technology experts to 25 countries and, beginning last year, we started dispatching youth volunteers to more than 20 nations in order to teach Internet-use skills. At the same time, Korea has helped to build regional information and

telecommunication centres and has supported various ICT training projects in developing nations through the Korea-Economic Commission for Africa Cooperation Fund and the Korea-Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific Fund.

However, bridging the digital divide is an overwhelming task and cannot be carried out by one country alone. I therefore urge advanced nations and other entities to involve themselves more deeply in that endeavour.

My purpose in coming here will have been more than served if my statement is somehow able to induce the developing nations to hope and the developed nations to act. I have undying faith in the ability and commitment of the United Nations to bridge the digital divide. I wish the Assembly every success.

Organization of work

The President: I should now like to consult members with regard to the need for an additional plenary meeting. Members will recall that, in paragraph 1 of resolution 56/258, the General Assembly decided that the Meeting of the General Assembly would consist of three plenary meetings. In addition, in this connection, I should like to inform Member States that there are still some 55 speakers remaining on the list of speakers. In order for the Assembly to accommodate all of the remaining speakers, I should like to propose that the General Assembly hold an additional plenary meeting tomorrow morning, Tuesday, 18 June 2002, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

I see no objection.

It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 12.55 p.m.

United Nations A/56/PV.102

General Assembly
Fifty-sixth session

Official Records

102nd plenary meeting
Monday, 17 June 2002, 3 p.m.
New York

President: Mr. Han Seung-soo ..... (Republic of Korea)

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Agenda item 12 (*continued*)

Report of the Economic and Social Council

Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development

Mr. Mahendran (Sri Lanka): I listened with great care to the galaxy of speakers this morning, and what has to be said about information and communication technologies (ICT) has been said. What we have to do now is to take stock of how to proceed. In that regard, Mr. President, I was touched by a number of paragraphs of your statement, and I would like to read out some extracts:

> "However, we are faced by the sad reality that this immense potential of ICT is not being adequately harnessed currently. The digital divide threatens to further marginalize the economies and peoples of the developing countries, as well as of countries with economies in transition. Moreover, given the very dynamism of the ICT revolution, every day that passes without effective action further widens the divide, making the need for concerted effort by the international community a matter of utmost urgency." (*A/56/PV.101*)

Mr. President, these words of yours are what it is all about. Take the digital divide, for example. Whether it is between developed and developing nations, whether it is between the North and the South, whether it is between cities and villages, whether it is between communities, whether it is between races, ICT can play a very effective role in reducing that divide. But how do we proceed with this? That is the question that needs to be answered.

Mr. President, in your wisdom, you said much more, and I wish again to quote your words:

> "I think we all agree that political leadership and commitment at the highest level are necessary in order to integrate ICT for development programmes into national development strategies." (*ibid.*)

There again we come to the essence of the argument. We all know how beneficial ICT can be to all of us. But how do you bring about a marriage between the private sector, the governmental agencies, the United Nations and all other stakeholders in order to achieve substantial progress towards attaining what we are aiming at? That is going to be the real crux of what we face in the coming decade.

Fortunately, we have the umbrella of the United Nations, and we can go forward under that umbrella. I am sure that the giants of industry in the private sector would not begrudge a United Nations effort to bring about such a marriage. What we need here is a meeting of the minds. In order to bring this about, I think that you touched a chord, Mr. President, when you said to let this be a beginning: the political commitment of all

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of us to work towards a very necessary goal. If not, in countries such as ours, Sri Lanka, the people in the cities and in the villages will not be able to speak the same language in the future. The poor will get poorer, and the city folks will be much better off. The same applies to the North and the South, or to the developed and the developing world. That is going to be our problem.

The Sri Lanka delegation fully supports the statement made by the Chairman of the Group of 77 this morning. We feel that it is time for all of us to sit down together, whether it be with IBM, Microsoft, Sony or Samsung. I am sure that those giant corporations can and will be convinced to join the ministries of our countries that handle ICT and to work with the United Nations to bring about the revolution we seek. As the President told us this morning, the digital divide is getting wider, not narrower. I hope we can achieve something in the future.

Mr. Arias (Spain) (*spoke in Spanish*): I have the honour of speaking on behalf of the European Union (EU). We are witnessing the beginning of a new era marked by the birth of the information society, which is causing a profound change in our way of life. This will be a new civilization with characteristics and consequences similar to those of the industrial revolution in its time. It is our responsibility not to waste this opportunity, so that technological advances can promote greater well-being for society as a whole and provide a better quality of life for all citizens. Progress must reach all humanity.

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have been the motor for the growth of economies since the beginning of the 1970s. They are probably one of the most powerful tools of globalization. The world is witnessing a transformation in the concept of information. It is no longer the heritage of the few. It has become a prerequisite for economic and social development. These technologies are creating a new economy in which the main challenge is to make the great benefits of the information revolution accessible to 4 billion people. We cannot afford to the let the digital disadvantage of two thirds of humanity continue to worsen. We must fight with determination against information poverty, for which we will need leadership and commitment at the highest level in the developing countries.

Information and communication technologies can bring great advantages to humanity. They are a tool in the fight against poverty, and they offer an opportunity for wealth creation, social cohesion and cultural diversity. Furthermore, they offer individuals — including in the developing countries — an opportunity for access to information and knowledge, which is essential for progress in the areas of education and health, and for economic progress in general.

The United Nations has a fundamental role to play in the information society, because the Organization provides a unique framework for the design of appropriate mechanisms to close the digital divide affecting humanity. The Economic and Social Council, conscious of its responsibilities, adopted its important resolution 2000/29, in which it decided to create the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force under the leadership of the Secretary-General. The European Union considers the establishment of the Task Force to be a timely and necessary initiative since information and communication technologies constitute a valuable instrument for the eradication of poverty.

However, the challenge is great. Therefore, the Task Force must mobilize Governments as well as civil society and the private sector in order to meet precise objectives on the path we must travel to close the digital divide. These meetings are among the milestones in this process; they provide an extraordinary sounding board for identifying the actions that must be taken to promote the information society.

The European Union is convinced that these meetings, together with the associated panels, will contribute to enriching the work of the World Summit on the Information Society, to take place in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunisia in 2005, with the objective of developing a strategic plan of action. It will be a United Nations summit at the level of heads of State or Government to which the European Union entrusts a crucial role in the design of tomorrow's society. The European Union will spare no effort to ensure its success.

However, it is not only United Nations Member States that are responsible for a positive outcome of the Summit. Non-governmental organizations, the private sector and civil society in general also have a fundamental role to play. In this regard, the European

Union believes that the Summit must not limit participation to heads of State or Government. Rather, from the preparatory process onward, it must be open to the participation of the private sector and of civil society. In addition, the European Union considers that the Summit must be organized in such a way that all sectors with a share of responsibility in the world of ICT will be able to contribute to its beneficial outcome. I am referring to a range of actors ranging from academia to the financial sector.

In our view, the Summit is the forum in which the following key issues must be addressed: the design of policies and regulatory frameworks to promote the growth of the ICT sector with a view to reducing the digital divide; the role of ICT in alleviating poverty and in promoting economic well-being, keeping in mind the role ICT can play in making Governments more transparent and more accountable to their citizens and in ensuring freedom of expression and full respect for democracy; the promotion of access to information and knowledge, including extremely important issues such as secure Internet access; and the establishment of new mechanisms for the governance of technologies — what has been called the regulation of globalization.

A good example of the attention that the European Union has been giving to the grave problems caused by the digital divide was the European Union's decision to sponsor the Group of Seven (G-7) Conference on the Information Society held in 1995 in Brussels. Since then, the European Union has on a number of occasions expressed its ambition to share the benefits of the new technologies on a global scale. In that context, we should consider the Okinawa Charter on Global Information Society adopted by the G-8, which established the Digital Opportunity Task Force, which has been doing important work.

Allow me to refer briefly to the efforts that the European Union has made so that the benefits of ICT can reach all its citizens, including those of European Union candidate countries. One of the top priorities of the European Union is the adoption of policies to strengthen a European information society. That has led to an initiative known as e-Europe, whose goal is to bring information closer to our citizens while being mindful of their cultural diversities. ICT provides new space for freedom of expression and intercultural dialogue, and can thus contribute to an affirmation of the cultural and linguistic diversity of peoples. In addition, at the European Council session in Barcelona, member States requested the Commission to draft a plan of action called e-Europe 2003, whose priorities include the strengthening of the three pillars of the information society: e-education, e-health and e-government. In this context, the international conference on e-government for development, held in Palermo, Italy, on 10 and 11 April, stressed the fact that ICT should not be considered in isolation but should instead be part of the overall strategy for development that the European Union wishes to promote in its cooperation programmes with other countries.

The EU wishes to reaffirm that it considers information and communication technologies to be an effective tool to fight poverty in order to attain the goals of the Millennium Declaration. Therefore, we are working closely with the international community to encourage the use of information and communication technologies, especially in the area of capacity-building. Those technologies will be a cross-cutting theme in all European Union programmes. In fact, significant resources are available in the Alliance for the Information Society programme for Latin America, in the Asia Information Technology and Communications programme for Asia and in the Euro-Mediterranean Information Society programme for the Mediterranean region. A programme for the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries is in its conceptual stage.

In that context, the EU understands that the International Telecommunication Union is a forum in which countries can exchange points of view on access to information. Moreover, the EU considers that, in its global strategy to close the digital divide, mechanisms of cooperation among United Nations agencies should be strengthened. Therefore, links should be established with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization to work on e-education issues, with the World Health Organization to share experiences on e-health, and with other agencies of the United Nations system, without forgetting the regional economic commissions, always seeking the involvement of public and private actors that can contribute to a more balanced sharing of digital opportunities.

I should like to conclude my statement with an appeal for realism. It is certain that the new technologies are not the panacea for all the problems that humanity faces. However, they can assist

decisively in eradicating poverty, thus contributing to the attainment of the great goals of the Millennium Declaration.

Mr. Alvarez (Andorra): First of all, I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for your initiative to convene this important meeting, and to thank the Secretariat for the background documentation and for the preparation of the panel meetings.

Two years ago, information technology was at the core of the discussion during the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council, underlining the significant role that information and communication technologies (ICT) play in the process of development. The United Nations ICT Task Force was then created to ensure the follow-up of those discussions and to undertake efforts to bridge the global digital divide, which remains a worrisome reality. Today, we are here to continue the review of the role of ICT in development and to prepare ourselves for the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held at Geneva and at Tunis.

I would like to underline four points of major interest to my Government. First, we believe that the international community should focus on ways and means of strengthening the structures that are crucial for technological development. The first step is to support national efforts aimed at establishing the necessary human and physical infrastructure for information and communication technologies. In that context, the private sector can play a significant role, especially in capacity-building and in encouraging investment in research and development. The second step consists of strengthening international research cooperation, which is a valuable tool to ensure access to and transfer of technology. In that respect, South-South cooperation has yielded good results. However, we believe that a key complement to successful South-South cooperation is North-South cooperation.

My second point relates to ICT and sustainable development. In general terms, information and communication technologies have been identified as the key determinants for creating a global knowledge-based economy, generating growth and creating employment and wealth. In more concrete terms, information and communication technologies help countries to better develop national policies — through, for example, the collection of data and the generation of indexes — and to better implement them via the transfer of information and knowledge.

Thirdly, we believe that partnerships between the private and public sectors within and among countries, as well as partnerships with the United Nations, play a unique role in forging development. Partnerships, especially between the public and private sectors, can be used to promote access to ICT, especially for the youngest members of society and for those whose access to new technologies may be compromised by an economic, social or physical handicap. For those reasons, we hope that the World Summit on the Information Society will be an opportunity for us to review the situation and to analyse additional partnership strategies to narrow the global digital divide that exists within and among countries.

Fourthly, and in conclusion, I would like to draw the Assembly's attention to the need to develop and promote the use of new technologies that are not only user-friendly but also low in cost. In that context, I would like to cite as an example a project that has been put forward by my Government — more precisely by its Commission for the Information Society — that we call the United Nations Mobile. In brief, the United Nations Mobile is a new communications channel, based on personal digital assistants, that can act as an information bridge between the members of the United Nations community and other users around the world. It allows users to obtain the most updated information, which Permanent Missions can then publish very easily on the Internet. In fact, this project was presented this afternoon, with great acceptance among some Assembly members, which may predict its success.

Mr. Niculescu (Romania): At the outset, I would like to congratulate you, Mr. President, on the initiative to convene a meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. For all those who invested a great deal of effort in making this event happen, it is especially gratifying to see so many prominent personalities, representing Governments, civil society, the business community and relevant international organizations, attending this special meeting.

Information and communication technologies are undoubtedly powerful tools for development, creating jobs and transforming, inter alia, education, health care, trade and politics. One of the most pressing challenges in the new century will be to harness that

extraordinary force, spread it throughout the world and make its benefits accessible to all humanity, in particular the poor.

Our discussions over the past several years have proved very useful in shaping the common vision set out in the Ministerial Declaration of the 2000 High-Level Segment of the Economic and Social Council and in the Millennium Declaration. We welcomed the ensuing steps taken, such as the launching of the United Nations ICT Task Force by the Secretary-General and of the Digital Opportunity Task Force within the Group of Eight, and especially their agreement to work together to advance a shared agenda. In the same vein, we salute the initiative to hold the World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005. Our meeting is thus well timed to sustain the momentum and to continue an inclusive approach that includes the participation of all stakeholders.

We are convinced that the United Nations system should play a leading role in all efforts directed at expanding the impact of ICT on development. That is why we hope that this meeting will address the digital divide in the context of globalization and the development process — both in plenary meeting and in panel discussions — and promote coherence and synergy among various regional and international information and communication technologies initiatives.

In that spirit, I would like to make a few comments about our experience using ICT in Romania and our specific contribution at the international level. A national strategy for the implementation of the information society has been developed in Romania through cooperation among civil society, the business community and the public administration. Just last year, an ICT promotion group was set up. That group is led by the Prime Minister and composed of e-ministers with a stake in e-development. The group has as mandate to facilitate and integrate all e-development for the benefit of citizens and the business community. At the same time, a package ICT of legislation was initiated by the specially created new Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. The Parliament has also adopted specific laws to provide regulation in various areas in this field. Those include laws on the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data, the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy in the telecommunications sector, electronic signatures, electronic commerce and e-procurement.

The expansion of Internet use makes e-government possible. It also makes it necessary to reinvent the concept of Government, as well as its activities. The Government is therefore committed to using new technologies to better fulfil its obligations towards its citizens; to provide better education and social protection and to promote economic growth and ensure free-market competitiveness. Providing government services online will encourage better penetration of new technologies and will help boost infrastructure development. To illustrate this point, I would like to mention just two of the pilot projects that have been developed at the national level. One of the those projects involves online payment of local taxes, in order to reduce the delays and costs related to the slowness of circulating cash. The other involves utilizing e-procurement to ensure transparency and efficiency in public procurement processes.

On the international level, Romania is a member of the United Nations Information and Communication Technology Task Force, and is fully involved in the preparatory process for the World Summit on the Information Society. Within the context of the preparations for the Summit, a pan-European regional ministerial conference will be held in Bucharest from 7 to 9 September 2002. The Bucharest conference, which is being organized in cooperation with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, will provide both thematic debates and partnership events.

As far as the thematic debates are concerned, the themes will include knowledge-based society, e-government, access to infrastructure and institutional frameworks, trade in the new economy and quality of life in the information society. The partnership events will include a business round table and a civil society forum. In preparation for the Summit, the conference is designed to conduct a regional assessment, to establish a platform for dialogue that includes all major stakeholders, to develop a vision for a knowledge-based society and to prepare positions and identify key subjects, initiatives and networks in the region.

It is our understanding that by working together to bridge the digital divide, we can make an important contribution to global peace and progress. I extend our full support to the Assembly for a successful meeting.

Mr. Mahmood (Pakistan): I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the convening of these General Assembly meetings devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. The topic itself assumes importance in view of the tremendous potential that information technologies have with regard to addressing development issues in all their aspects.

We would also like to avail ourselves of this opportunity to fully align ourselves with the statement made earlier by the Chairman of the Group of 77. His statement reflects the collective aspiration of developing countries to address development issues, specially the reduction of poverty.

In line with the Millennium Declaration, the Government of Pakistan recognizes the great potential of information and communication technologies in developing a knowledge-based economy and helping to reduce poverty. However, the widening digital divide is seriously undermining that potential. To bridge the digital divide it is necessary that concerted efforts be made for the development of human resources conversant with ICT. It is also necessary to expand telecommunication infrastructures and to ensure the widespread use of computers. Unless those three fundamental ingredients are present, the goal of using ICT to bridge the digital divide will remain elusive. It is therefore essential that we take a realistic view of the situation and address the issues that might obstruct attaining these very fundamental goals.

First, it is unreasonable to expect poor people struggling to earn their living to make an investment in computers. It would be equally naive to think that Governments of developing countries will have resources to roll out telecommunications infrastructure in uneconomic rural areas, where poor people live, or to make investments in raising people's computer literacy at the village level.

Secondly, the unaffordable cost of software and business strategies that involve frequent upgrades that require a continual drain of resources from a poor man's pocket are great deterrents. It is therefore necessary that multilateral donors, bilateral donors, aid-giving agencies and large entrepreneurs take the lead in meeting the costs of expanding and operating ICT infrastructure and of developing open-source software to help the poor have access to the immense resources and potential of ICT.

It would be desirable for a suitably large ICT fund to be created by business, entrepreneurs, technology companies and a variety of donors to help provide the means for poorer countries to gain access to the potential of ICT. Investment through such a fund could be viewed as a means of opening new markets in the long term. For companies that want to be independent of a common fund, appropriate tax incentives or insurance schemes could be devised by developed countries to provide the necessary funding to developing countries.

In conclusion, I would like to state that the Government of Pakistan is fully committed to promoting ICT as one of the vehicles of development. An aggressive programme for human resources development has been launched, bandwidth prices have been reduced from $83,000 per E-1 line to $6,000 per E-1 line, and access to the Internet has been provided for more than 700 towns. The availability of reliable international bandwidth has been increased to 410 megabits per second. Four mobile companies are rolling out mobile telephone services, and programmes, including those relating to e-government and e-commerce, are being launched.

We look forward wholeheartedly to working with the United Nations and its Information and Communication Technologies Task Force towards the implementation of information communication technologies for development. We also welcome the decision to convene the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held at Geneva in December 2003 and at Tunis in December 2005.

Mr. Villanueva (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): One of the most disturbing aspects of the current process of economic globalization is the concentration of technological capacity and innovation in a minority of countries. According to the United Nations Development Programme's *Human Development Report 2001*, in 1998 the 29 countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) spent $520 billion on research and development — an amount greater than the combined economic output of the 88 poorest countries of the world. This expenditure on technological research and development leads not only to constant innovation, but to ownership and, therefore, to exclusion. Indeed, the countries of OECD, which account for only 14 per cent of the world's population, were responsible for 86 per cent of the 836,000 patent

applications filed in 1998 and for 85 per cent of the 437,000 articles that appeared in specialized technical publications worldwide. In addition, 66 per cent of all royalties and licensing rights for 1999 were shared by just two industrialized countries.

Furthermore, technology is distributed unequally. The richest countries have more than 80 per cent of the world's Internet users. In the developing countries, there are only 69 fixed-line telephones for every 1,000 people, while in the countries members of OECD teledensity is 509 per 1,000 people. The bandwidth of the whole of Latin America is broadly equivalent to that of the city of Seoul. All of these figures point to a clear diagnosis: with regard to technological advances, countries that are not in the mainstream are left behind or left out, and this has a decisive impact on their development potential and their economic viability.

The challenge, therefore, is how to bridge this digital and technological divide. In other words, what measures can we adopt at the international, regional and national levels to help those countries that are not in the mainstream to benefit from and participate in the technological revolution and in globalization? This should not be a matter of merely facilitating access by people from our countries to new technologies — although that is certainly important, and to that end we must address the issue of revenue bottlenecks. Faced with a lack of purchasing power and the inability to allocate income for Internet use, it is very difficult for us to disseminate new information and communication technologies among our population.

We must also deal with the problems of generating technologies at the national level and of adapting the nature of information to the situation of each country. This brings us to the heart of the problem: tackling the issue of developing human resources. And the key to that is education. Without education we cannot bridge the digital and technological divide, still less resolve the problem of poverty.

In this regard, the Government of Peru has embarked on an unprecedented programme aimed at bringing technological progress closer to the poorest groups, in particular the rural population. The Huascarán Plan — named, for symbolic reasons, after the highest mountain in our country — has, in just a few months, connected more than 100 rural and urban schools to Internet services, supported by specialized digital libraries and teacher training through the use of videoconferencing. We hope that by 2006, over 15,000 high schools — accounting for nearly all Peruvian students — will be included in this information and communications network.

My country firmly believes that this effort will affect the education and other aspects of the life of Peruvian students, having a positive influence on their families and communities, strengthening their economic activities, which are basically agricultural, and directing them towards new opportunities and markets. Important as such efforts are, however, they are insufficient given the grave technological underdevelopment confronting many developing countries. The widening technological divide between those societies in the vanguard of the technological advance and those that are standing still is contributing to the spread of chaos, poverty and conflict, and this is becoming a problem of global proportions.

We must therefore take advantage of the positive potential of this revolution to shape democratic societies and promote citizen participation, efficient and transparent governance and competitive economies. In this context, Peru welcomes the fact that the United Nations has taken the initiative to meet this challenge; here, we again welcome the creation of the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force and the work that it is carrying out. We hope that the Task Force will make it possible to reverse the current trend and enable the developing countries to participate in mechanisms for the control and dissemination of information and communication technologies. We therefore support the work plan that has been developed by the Task Force.

Peru believes that, in the context of that work plan, particular attention must be given to four objectives: strengthening human resources; creating jobs, particularly for young people; supporting improved competitiveness in our economies, particularly through access to and dissemination of technology in small and medium-sized companies; and identifying new sources of financing.

Let us hope that this exchange of opinions, experience and determination, as well as the effective implementation of the plan of action of the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, will contribute to greater international awareness and to the adoption of effective measures to minimize the

imbalances from which we are currently suffering with the legitimate hope of eliminating them.

Mr. Al-Bader (Qatar) (*spoke in Arabic*): It is an honour for me, on behalf of the State of Qatar, to offer my sincere congratulations to you, Sir, on presiding over the General Assembly during its meeting devoted to information and communications technologies (ICT) for development in preparation for the upcoming World Summit on the Information Society. I am pleased that my delegation is able to participate in this important discussion — one that we hope will reach useful conclusions, thereby increasing the possibility that the Summit will be a great success.

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, human society has been constantly developing information and knowledge. The development that has been achieved to date has completely changed the shape of the world, and we cannot compare yesterday's ICT to today's. The present is saturated with knowledge, science and means of modern communication that have been of service to humanity. With the availability of ICT, the world is within the easy reach of all. Events that occur in the East reach the West almost immediately and directly, as if we were living through the same event. This is remarkable, particularly if it is used, in the people's interest, to portray the reality of the human condition, something that promotes empathy among human beings.

But it is a matter of concern that the huge potential of the ICT revolution is not adequately reflected in the development policies, programmes and projects of some countries. The United Nations, with its moral status, universality and representative nature, is in a unique position to crystallise a vision of ICT as a constructive element in providing information and knowledge to the world's poorest people. Such technologies could be used to support United Nations efforts to eradicate poverty, promote awareness and prevent contagious diseases such as AIDS. In order for us to obtain tangible ongoing results in this area, action to harness ICT for development should be local, while cooperation at the regional and subregional levels should be promoted.

In order to provide access to ICT for the poor of society, we should use new models and make full use of the available innovation to improve the health and education of the poor. Let us be realistic: ICT is not a panacea for poverty or development problems. Yet it is capable of making a larger contribution to addressing many of the development challenges before us.

As to the preparatory work for the World Summit on the Information Society, the indicators are very encouraging. We seem to be moving in the right direction in this preparatory process, particularly as concerns worldwide regional meetings and conferences. In the Arab region, the sixth meeting of Arab Ministers of Communication was held on 12 June 2002; there we considered how to implement the Arab ICT strategy in the service of the development of the countries of the region, and how to develop communications among the States of the region and how to connect them in all spheres, including education, health, commerce and economics. Participants at the meeting also considered the decisions and resolutions of the Beirut Arab Summit as they relate to this strategy, and considered the preparations being made for the World Summit on the Information Society, which will be held in Geneva and in Tunisia. These preparatory meetings will be very useful to ensure the success of the World Summit, particularly if they address concerns and make recommendations to the World Summit. Everyone is looking forward to this in order to serve countries that have not fully shared in the ICT revolution. We cannot predict the future of the ICT revolution. New things are invented every day. We are simply asking that the revolution be used in the interest of humanity.

Communications has become a huge and profitable market, particularly for those companies that manufacture communications equipment. While we admire their inventions and the development of modern means of communication, at the same time we call upon them to consider the situation of the poor and the least developed countries, since they are in dire need of outside assistance in order to develop their own communication centres that would link them with the outside world and with what happens there.

Mr. Clodumar (Nauru): I have the pleasure to deliver this statement on behalf of the members of the Pacific Islands Forum group that are Members of the United Nations, namely Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and my own country, Nauru.

Our group is particularly pleased to participate in this important discussion. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are viewed by Governments, the private sector and users in many walks of life in the Pacific islands as holding much promise for development, so much so that "ICT for every Pacific islander" has been chosen as the theme for recent regional events in the sector. This theme has led to the proposal of a Pacific ICT for development (I4D) initiative for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which I will describe in a moment. But first, I would like to highlight the Pacific context and what ICT means to us.

For small islands dispersed over vast ocean distances, facing limited natural resources and high transportation costs, more efficient and affordable information and communication technologies are essential to connect our island communities to the rest of the world. With the Internet transforming the way we do business, access to the Internet by Governments, businesses and the general public is essential for economic development. Full participation in many sectors is now impossible without reliable and affordable access.

The Pacific has come a long way in a short time. Consider where we were as recently as 1995: faxes were a novelty, and there was no such thing as e-mail or web browsing for most Pacific people. Now we consider the Internet to be an essential service, we cannot work without e-mail and we expect our mobile phones to roam across all countries seamlessly. Even more impressive are three of the recent promising regional success stories: distance education, telemedicine and the use of satellite technology to provide access in remote areas. There is a better future for the Pacific, and ICT holds one of the most important keys to creating it.

Promoting ICT development, however, takes concerted national and regional efforts. The question is: how should we respond to these challenges and opportunities? The Pacific region has come together to develop its answer to that question. The regional goal is to create an environment where all stakeholders — Governments, teachers and students, business people, doctors and non-governmental organizations — are provided with the tools they need to further their own development, and through the aggregation of these individual efforts, that of our countries and the region.

To coordinate domestic and international efforts, the Pacific region has developed a framework to bring many diverse threads together. The Pacific islands ICT policy and strategic plan developed recently by ministers of the 16-member Pacific Islands Forum is intended to leverage our collective expertise and make the most of our resources. The report of the high-level meeting in that regard is annexed to document A/56/968, and copies of the full text of the regional policy and strategic plan are available in the General Assembly Hall for the information of interested delegations.

That framework includes a four-pronged strategy to develop human resources, infrastructure, Internet applications and policy and regulations for the development of the Pacific islands. Within this framework, a consensus has emerged on the four top priorities: human resources development for ICT professionals; refinement and promotion of national ICT strategies; continued development of telemedicine for remote consultation and diagnosis; provision of multi-purpose community telecentres for universal access to the information age.

The Pacific region has emphasized the need to think regionally when developing an implementation strategy on those issues. In the areas of international policy, access to development assistance and political support, we stand together through our partnerships among Governments, regional organizations, industry and multilateral agencies.

It is for these reasons that we have proposed the Pacific I4D initiative as our framework for partnership through the process of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Its goal is to provide access to information and communication technology in support of sustainable development for every Pacific islander. The Pacific I4D initiative represents the direct implementation of the activities called for in chapter 40 of Agenda 21, on information for decision-making, which states that in sustainable development, everyone is a user and provider of information considered in the broadest sense.

The objectives therefore include: strengthening existing national and international mechanisms of information processing and exchange, and of related technical assistance, so as to ensure the effective and equitable availability of information generated at the local, provincial, national and international levels;

strengthening national capacities, including capacities within Governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector in information handling and communication, particularly within developing countries; pursuing initiatives that support information-sharing, facilitate intergovernmental negotiations, monitor efforts for sustainable development, transmit environmental alerts and share data; and developing when necessary new technology to permit the participation of those not served at present by existing infrastructure and methods.

The Pacific I4D initiative is also in line with chapter VI of the United Nations Millennium Declaration in ensuring that Pacific island men and women are given equal opportunities to benefit from development through access to information.

Over the years, Pacific countries have shown that cooperative regional and international initiatives, combined with determined national efforts, can help to overcome the challenges I described earlier. We in the Pacific are known for our sense of community, and we know that by supporting each other, much can be achieved. I commend to the Assembly the Pacific islands ICT policy and the Pacific I4D initiative as road maps to a better future in our region and ask for support in implementing them.

Mr. Hasmy (Malaysia): At the outset, Mr. President, let me thank you and your country, the Republic of Korea, for initiating this timely meeting on the important subject of information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. Permit me also to thank the President of the Economic and Social Council, the Chairman of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, the representative of the Digital Opportunity Task Force and the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) for their important statements.

My delegation associates itself with the statement made by the Vice-Minister for Science and Technology of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. However, I wish to take this opportunity to make a brief statement on a number of issues of particular interest to my delegation.

Information and communication technology has revolutionalized the world. The ICT revolution, with its knowledge and technological capacities, has an immense potential to accelerate the growth and development of the developing countries. It is indeed encouraging to note that throughout the world, about 400 million people are connected to cyberspace. However, my delegation is saddened that only 5 per cent of that figure represents those residing in developing countries. Clearly the developing world is lagging far behind. The international community must address the digital divide between developed and developing countries if it is serious about implementing the Millennium Development Goals.

This meeting is a step in the right direction as it brings together relevant stakeholders — government, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, multilateral development institutions and the United Nations — at the same forum to exchange ideas and experience with a view to promote and forge a common undertaking to address the global digital disparity. My delegation looks forward especially to the discussion in the more interactive informal panels. The meeting also allows Member States to provide some ideas and views on the preparatory work of the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005.

The United Nations ICT Task Force was launched last November by the Secretary-General with a view to positioning ICT as an enabling factor in the building of a poverty-free world. We hope that the ICT Task Force will catalyse the bridging of the global digital divide and foster digital opportunities that put ICT at the service of development for all. The challenge for the international community is to technologically empower the marginalized 4 billion of the world's population so they can participate in and benefit from the ICT revolution. Genuine international cooperation is essential to ensure a real, tangible and sustained transfer of knowledge and ICT technology to developing countries.

Information represents a powerful tool to enrich and empower all humankind, as a knowledgeable society would generate more benefits for the peoples of the world. At the Millennium Summit, our leaders, aspired to the right to universal access to information and communication technologies. The developed countries must therefore assist the developing countries in their efforts to develop those technologies, as embodied in the Millennium Declaration agreed upon by our leaders. The work of the ICT Task Force and the Group of Eight Digital Opportunity Task Force are critical in this regard.

The Internet has sparked the creation of a new era for humankind. Nations have to adapt to the revolution in the information sector in order to progress. Knowledge has become a factor for change, and since the early 1990s the Government of Malaysia has embarked on a quest to transform Malaysians into a knowledge society. The National Information Technology Council (NITC) was established in 1994 with the vision of creating an information-rich society to enhance the development and utilization of ICT as a strategic technology for national development. The NITC acts as a think tank at the highest level and advises the Government on matters pertaining to the development of ICT in Malaysia. It is a smart partnership among the private, public and community sectors. In addition to the multimedia super-corridor initiative, our national information technology agenda was formulated in 1996 to provide a comprehensive framework for development in the information age.

It is important that efforts to bridge the information and knowledge gap are focused not just on the gap between Malaysia and other nations, but also on the gap between local communities in Malaysia itself. The number of Internet users in Malaysia has increased fourfold, or 400 per cent, from 1.6 million in 1998 to 6.5 million in 2001. We expect the number will surge to 10 million next year.

Nevertheless, what is more critical is to foster the use of technology so that all segments of society will seize the opportunities emerging from the information age. In Malaysia, we have identified five segments of the population threatened with marginalization by the ICT revolution: senior citizens, youth, women, people with disabilities, and geographically isolated communities. Together, they constitute almost half of the country's population. The NITC's social digital inclusion programme aims to address those community groups to ensure that the digital divide is bridged for every sector of the community.

An important segment of the population is the younger generation. In Malaysia, one third of our population is under 14 years old. It is essential to provide early ICT exposure to that group through appropriate programmes or projects in order to develop the potential human capital for the knowledge economy. In March 2002, the Ministry of Education of Malaysia, together with the United Nations Development Programme and Coca-Cola, embarked on a new partnership and pilot project, "e-Learning for life", to spearhead efforts to bridge the digital divide in Malaysia. The goal is to help local communities bridge the growing digital divide between ICT haves and have-nots. It will bring e-learning opportunities and ICT training resources to students, to teachers and to local communities. The project is an example of how the United Nations and the private sector can assist in supporting a national Government's vision of building a knowledge-based society in one country.

In its efforts to promote international cooperation in the area of information and communication technologies — especially among developing countries — Malaysia is privileged and pleased to have been chosen to host the secretariat of the Global Knowledge Partnership (GKP), a growing partnership of public, private and non-profit/non-governmental organizations around the world that are dedicated to promoting information and knowledge for development. Through the GKP, Malaysia hopes to promote enhanced South-South cooperation as well as North-South cooperation in bridging the global digital divide and in nurturing the global information society.

Sustainable development on a global scale requires accelerated transfer of knowledge and technology — especially ICT — to developing countries from developed countries. The United Nations is well positioned to take a lead role in shaping the global ICT vision for development. The challenge for the international community is not only to bridge the existing global digital divide, but also to avert its further widening. Otherwise, developing countries will be further marginalized in the information age by the wave of globalization. Therein lies the importance of this meeting and the commendable role played by the Republic of Korea in initiating it. We trust that there will be follow-up actions to assist developing countries in that regard.

Mr. Ehandi (Estonia): I represent the Look@World Foundation, which is an initiative of major private sector companies in Estonia: banks, telecommunications companies and information technology companies. Last year, those companies formed the Foundation to promote Internet use and build the information society in Estonia. To that end, they are now prepared to invest funds equal to 25 to 30 per cent of the State's annual information technology budget — quite a significant contribution. Besides making investments, the Foundation acts as a

moderator among various societal sectors in order to advance the information society.

My statement is intended mostly to provide information for developing countries, because I believe that Estonia has been successful thus far in its efforts and that other countries can benefit from them. In addition, it is our view that in many areas, rather than imitating the European Union countries and other developed nations, we can and should do things differently. We realize that information and communication technologies (ICT) and the information society are not yet main priorities of many countries. However, access to information leads to knowledge, and in the future knowledge will be the main factor of production and competition, to which we all aspire.

Now I should like to share with the Assembly some of the reasons for Estonia's success. First, it will come as no surprise that there is dedicated political and business leadership. It is hard to believe how much depends on such leadership in Estonia, compared with some of the neighbouring countries. The prompt start-up — from scratch — of such initiatives as the famous Estonian paperless e-government system and the Tiger Leap project was made possible by political will. In Estonia, well-considered grass-roots initiatives have quickly become official policy, involving all possible stakeholders from all possible sectors and then spreading throughout society. Our politicians have come to understand that the most effective way to reduce the overhead costs of government is to use ICT.

Mr. Ouch (Cambodia), Vice-President, took the Chair.

Some time ago, I had the opportunity to hear a presentation on ICT by the Prime Minister of another Eastern European country. It was a nice speech and was well delivered, but somehow I got the feeling that he did not understand a word that he was reading. When one compares the information society in Estonia and in that country, one can see the difference in our daily lives. It is tremendously important that political leaders be empowered to build the information society, that they understand it and that they participate in its advancement. A problem of politicians — and since I represent the private sector, I can say this — is that, for them, everything that seems of even moderate importance becomes a priority. There are too many priorities, and no one can distinguish between true priorities and mere slogans. In order to build a functioning information society, we must make that objective a true priority.

Secondly — and this is a very important point — our experience has shown us that a lack of resources is not always bad. As a former country of the Soviet Union, Estonia does not have lavish resources, but we believe that that has worked in our favour. For example, in Germany, every major city — such as Berlin, Bremen or Hamburg — builds its own e-citizen portal. When I asked German officials when and how those systems would be integrated into one system for their citizens, they answered that they did not understand why that should be necessary. It took me a while to understand that in Germany, every city has ample funds to make its own investments, and that cities would rather compete than cooperate to offer the best services for their citizens. Such practices may work in richer countries, but, thank goodness, we cannot employ them in Estonia, where funds are scarce. Not only must our municipalities determine how they can pool their resources, but the entire public sector must cooperate and work with the private sector.

There are a number of examples of the various sectors cooperating in Estonia. An example is our digital signature and electronic identification card, where the private sector set up the certification agency and the infrastructure and the State financed the production of the cards. There is also the example of developing public-access Internet points, where the initial investment in computers and connections came mostly from the private sector and where municipalities pay all the costs of operation. And there is the example of the e-citizen portal currently being built, where the State is building a common technical solution to provide e-services that include high-level security and authorization systems and so on. As part of that portal, the central Government, municipalities and private sector service providers will all participate. Again, this is a case of cooperation. The lack of financial resources is therefore good sometimes, because one then has no money to make exaggerated systems that, while fancy, may be of little use.

My third point, one which I think is quite interesting, is that Governments should outsource everything but decision-making. The fact is that the private sector has better know-how about how to build e-services and information systems. It should not be a goal for a State to have a great and very large information technology team, or even a ministry. There

must just be a good project management team that ties together all the needs of the State and outsources all the systems and services. Even State databases can in theory be outsourced to a private company. In the end, things turn out to be cheaper and more professional when done this way. Do not be afraid to outsource and use private sector operators.

My next point has to do with deriving value from integration. The only point of making services available online is to make citizens' lives cheaper, quicker, easier, more comfortable or more fun; in other words, to provide real value. Cheaper, quicker and easier together make up efficiency, which, again, is the major driver and motivator for a State to build an information society.

Most services, such as health care and education, integrate data, include the involvement of several different governmental bodies, integrate central Government and local government activities and even include public sector services. There are many players. States should not deal with those services from an institutional perspective that says, "I bring my part to the Internet, let the municipalities and the private sector make their contribution." If one integrated service is cut into pieces, and if different bodies are making different contributions to the Internet, then there is absolutely no value created. I ask countries to please handle the services they want to bring to the Internet from a customer's point of view; consider how he or she will best get results and then involve all parties concerned with a given service and make the service available online in cooperation with all the players. Only then will e-service provide real value. Only then will investment not be wasted.

Very often the problem in this regard is the attitude of one sector towards another. The private sector often considers the State to be stupid. The State, however, cannot listen to just one player in the private sector, as that would be unfair to competitors and could be called corruption. To my surprise, for example, in Estonia a third-sector body like the Look@World Foundation, which I represent, has proven to be a suitable solution. We represent many powerful private sector companies, including all the biggest companies having an interest in the information society. Many of them compete among themselves. If it is inconvenient for the State to deal with one of those companies, then they are very open to deal with us. We therefore very much act as moderators between visions and the need for cooperation between the sectors in Estonia.

I would now like to give some hints about how to avoid a digital divide. We all know that the wealthy and younger parts of the population grasp the Internet and e-services more easily. We therefore all face the danger of a digital divide, irrespective of how wealthy or poor we are. To simplify things, let me say that we in Estonia have identified four preconditions necessary for someone to use the Internet and e-services. First, of course, there must be physical access to the Internet. Secondly, there must be content and services available. Thirdly, there must be motivation, by which we mean that a person must understand that using Internet services will bring him some value. And, fourthly, of course, there must be training; one must know how to use the Internet.

Meeting three of these preconditions without the fourth would not produce an Internet user; I ask members to think of their own experience. Omitting one of those preconditions would mean that one could not use the Internet. The real question here is the order in which one should provide the conditions so that investments can be made more wisely. I will not dwell much on content and motivation, as that is what most of my speech has been about. Rather, I will touch on access and training. As computer and broadband access in each home is still a far-off dream for must of us here, we in Estonia have started with public places. For several years now, 100 per cent of schools, 100 per cent of public sector organizations and about 90 per cent of the private sector in Estonia have had Internet access. So we have started from the places where people work. In addition, in a country as small as Estonia, municipalities and the Look@World Foundation have together created about 500 public access Internet points. That represents about one computer per 1,000 citizens, and we are continuing that process. I believe that this has given most citizens the ability to use the Internet if they have even the slightest desire to do so.

The second thing, of course, is training. Just this April, we started a project in Estonia to give basic training on how to use computers and the Internet to 100,000 citizens over a two-year period; this represents 10 per cent of our adult population. What is probably most important in this regard is the fact that the programme costs only about $25 to train one person, which is unbelievably cheap. We have just finished the

first pilot project, which was very successful. I was very happy to have heard here that the Republic of Korea has a similar project under way. The difference is probably that in Estonia the training project is fully financed by the private sector.

Another important hint for members, which they have already heard several times today, is the importance of liberalizing the telecommunication market. In fact, members have probably heard it hundreds of times: liberalize your telecommunication market and do not be afraid of competition. Nevertheless, in most countries liberalization takes more time than necessary. The major reason for not using the Internet is the cost, especially in poor countries. While in Finland or Sweden, for example, a person's decision to buy a computer and a permanent Internet connection depends mostly on will, in the majority of the world it is the money that counts. If we are to make cut prices, then the first step is to liberalize the telecommunication market. Do it. Do not be afraid.

My last, and very important, message to Governments is that the technology is itself actually very easy; it is the organizational structure and habits that create a bottleneck. Many people think that the information society is difficult because it involves complicated technology. But that is very wrong. Technology and information technology are easy; there are plenty of professionals out there who know all about it.

Back during a European Union meeting in Brussels we presented our Estonian paperless e-government system. As part of that system, for example, each and every Government decision is up on the Internet within 40 seconds after the sounding of the Prime Minister's gong. After that meeting, some French politicians came to us, investigated the system and were astonished. They asked us whether our Government really wanted such a system. Their concern was obvious. Why would a Government want to be so transparent and efficient? That is not the way that things are done. Indeed, implementing e-services and involving technology does nothing without changing organization, the process of offering services and even laws.

In the private sector, we say that there is nothing more stable than continuous adaptation to change. But so far, Governments have mostly refused to acknowledge that nowadays society is in a process of continuous acceleration, and they are not willing to change the way in which things are done.

If Governments want results and true value from the information society, therefore they must, before starting to use ICT within the public sector and turning public sector services into e-services, consider how much they are really ready to change processes and the way in which things are done. That seems to be a simple suggestion, but such change is strangely difficult to achieve in reality.

That is pretty much all that I have to say. To sum up, looking back I think that we have been very lucky in Estonia to have made the right decisions and choices so far. We want to share our experience. Estonia has already hosted official delegations from Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Armenia to talk about how we are moving towards the information society and e-government. Soon, people from Uzbekistan, Mongolia and Bulgaria will be visiting us.

Estonia is considering the idea of establishing an e-government academy so that we can start sharing our experience and expertise in an appropriate and structured way, rather than just when delegations come to visit. I cannot make any promises, but I hope we will be able to implement the idea by the end of the year. Then all will be welcome to come to Estonia to share their ideas and learn from our best practices and our experience so that we can move, together, towards an effective information society that provides value.

Mr. Korotkov (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): The fact that the General Assembly is considering a range of questions regarding the development of information and communication technologies (ICT) in today's world attests to the relevance and practical significance of this issue for the entire international community. Nobody can doubt that the development of information and communication technologies is one of the key conditions for sustainable development and thus for ensuring stability and security in the world.

In order to construct an information society, the international community must resolve complex tasks relating to, first and foremost, the establishment of adequate social and economic conditions and the elimination of the gap between developed and developing countries. Those objectives have been clearly set out — in the Millennium Declaration, as well as in decisions taken by various United Nations

forums in the past few years, including at the Monterrey International Conference on Financing for Development.

Furthermore, it should be clearly understood that the information revolution not only offers expanded possibilities and increased potential, but entails clear challenges and risks. Our common task is to identify and meet such challenges in a timely manner. The priority objective in this respect is bridging the digital divide. This will require joint efforts aimed at resolving a range of questions relating to the establishment of the necessary institutional and technological infrastructures, the training of skilled personnel and many other issues.

There are also dangers associated with the vulnerability of communities that are connected to the Internet. The war against international terrorism — in particular cyber-terrorism and cyber-crime — requires a special emphasis on information security. Furthermore, we must not permit — on the pretext of ensuring information security or for any other reason — the forced homogeneity of cultures or the stifling of the original and unique nature of the national traditions that form the shared heritage of humankind.

The Russian Government is fully aware of the importance of the application of information technology. In January this year, the Russian Government established a programme called "Electronic Russia 2002-2010". For an eight-year period, the Government will be interacting with civil society and the business sector at both national and international levels, with a view to increasing access to new developments in information technology for the majority of the citizens of our country.

We are holding round-table discussions with representatives of non-governmental organizations and business in order to draw up joint approaches aimed at achieving those objectives through new legislation and technology-related decisions. During a recent round table in my ministry, we gathered together representatives of competing companies, including IBM, Microsoft and Sun-Oracle, and asked them whether they could form a joint foundation on the basis of which they could work together to facilitate, for example, the circulation of electronic documents. I am glad to say that such solutions were found, and that today they are being used not only in major centres in Russia but in all 89 regions of our country.

The inaugural meeting of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force Regional Node for Europe and Central Asia was held at Geneva on 29 April this year. This brings together the scientific, educational and training networks of the States concerned and will enable us to avoid duplication when investing in similar projects in various spheres of knowledge.

In Russia we are planning to focus attention on several key areas. We believe that health-related issues will be among the most important issues in the twenty-first century. We therefore want to ensure that information technology is used in the service of health care, and to that end we are developing an electronic health-care programme.

We believe that developments in the educational field are of crucial importance. That is why the second key aspect of our programme will consist of projects related to distance learning and other electronic study and training projects.

Finally, we believe that it is very important to preserve for humankind the cultural, social and religious variety that exists in the world. For that reason, we will try to ensure that this body of knowledge is preserved, and will endeavour to build on it with the assistance of information technology.

A practical solution to the issue of bridging the digital divide would be truly advanced by increased assistance, inter alia through the United Nations, to all countries interested in the development of information technology. We call upon all to join forces in this endeavour.

Miss Durrant (Jamaica): At the outset, let me associate the Jamaican delegation with the statement made earlier today by the Chair of the Group of 77 and China.

Bridging the digital divide means that our populations will be able to exploit information and communications technologies (ICT) for social and productive advantage. We know that information, linked to knowledge and communication technologies, can enable us to plan, make decisions, innovate and implement new activities in areas including education, government services, medicine, business and essential services, such as disaster mitigation.

This meeting of the General Assembly, which builds on the initiatives taken by the Secretary-General

in the establishment of the ICT Task Force and by the Economic and Social Council, should, in the view of my delegation, focus particularly on policies which will enable citizens to access information generally needed by the public. This must be done by ensuring that there are digital networks in each country or region; that there is access to the Internet as a means of distributing and sharing information; that the bandwidth used is adequate; and that there are local telecentres where the public can access the Internet and the needed information. Access by the citizenry is dependent on diffusion of the technology and services to individuals and households, to educational institutions and to other public institutions such as libraries and community centres. Effective delivery of information services also requires that citizens be aware of a single point of entry to information held by their Governments and related agencies. This portal or gateway would thus serve as a guide to the related agencies and would enable access to a variety of sources.

ICT requires appropriate infrastructure, human, technical and material resources and facilities to ensure public access to the Internet at convenient locations. While advances have been made in many developing countries to increase public access to information via ICT, there is still the need to extend pilot projects to the wider population. Community telecentres in libraries, in non-governmental organizations and in community centres, matched with extended digital networking infrastructure, are therefore needed.

How then, we must ask, does the citizenry participate in this process of accessing and using information? They are involved in registering their civil status, educating themselves and their families, sustaining their farming and other production and introducing innovative business practices. The connectivity afforded by information technology can enable citizens to carry out these functions more effectively and to use information to protect themselves against disasters, particularly natural disasters.

Governments now have the opportunity to begin to use ICT in the provision of basic social services, including education and health, and to begin to implement electronic government by providing services online to citizens. Advantages include enabling citizens to have decentralized access to information and services. A person away from the capital should be able to access forms, submit applications and obtain needed data for decision-making or for further action. Reliable low-cost access influences the degree to which ICTs can be used by the population. In this regard, many Governments have introduced regulatory initiatives to enhance network competition.

Jamaica, a small island developing State, is very conscious of the major role of information in national development. Our Government very recently passed the Access to Information Act 2002, which is intended to reinforce and give further effect to certain fundamental principles underlying the system of constitutional democracy, namely governmental accountability, transparency and public participation in decision-making. We fully recognize that to fully implement the Act, Jamaica will need to expand the applications of electronic government; to enable development of related policies, human and technical resources and infrastructure; and to exploit information and communication technologies to enable citizens to have full access to official information.

Implementation of the Act, and other development initiatives, are greatly facilitated by the strategic use of information and communication technologies at the national, regional and international levels. I would draw attention to SIDSnet, developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the private sector, which already links small island States Members of the United Nations, enabling exchange of information on our sustainable development activities.

Within the Caribbean Community Single Market and Economy, the Council on Trade and Economic Development provides an intergovernmental network for the harmonization of these policies and for implementation on a regional basis. The University of the West Indies, a regional institution, uses distance education to link its campus and non-campus territories.

In Jamaica, liberalization, which we expect to be the driver of competition and expanded value-added services, has already been implemented through our Telecommunications Act of 2000. In that regard, the Office of Utility Regulation is engaged in an innovative process of ensuring that competition is implemented on a level playing field. We have begun to see the benefits of expanded access to cellular phone services. We have also begun a number of initiatives to

facilitate public access to information via the Internet. This access is being provided via public telecentres located in post offices, public libraries and community centres. We are still at the stage of pilot projects, established in collaboration with UNDP and the University of the West Indies, and implemented by centres which participate in the Sustainable Development Networking Programme in Jamaica. At the same time, due to a public-private cooperation programme, all schools and teacher training colleges are being equipped with computers and the applicable training.

Jamaica was pleased to host recent regional meetings on e-government, organized with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Government of Italy and the Caribbean Centre for Development Administration, as well as on the use of information technology in disaster management, organized with UNDP. It is important that the results of meetings such as these be speedily implemented at national and regional levels.

My delegation encourages this meeting of the General Assembly to agree on defining policies which will support the bridging of the digital divide and increasing the capability of our citizens to exploit technologies for the development of our communities. As many developing countries still lack the basic infrastructure, we emphasize that this must be done through public-private partnerships involving all stakeholders.

We must not see information and communication technologies as isolated instruments, but rather as key elements in accelerating growth, raising competitiveness, promoting sustainable development, eradicating poverty and facilitating the effective integration of all countries into the global economy, in accordance with the commitments contained in the Millennium Declaration.

We look forward to these issues being further addressed in the context of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, and in the process leading up to next year's World Summit on the Information Society.

Mr. Mera (Dominican Republic) (*spoke in Spanish*): Mr. President, at the outset allow me to express the support of the Dominican Republic for the statement made on behalf of the Group of 77 and China this morning.

On behalf of the Government of the Dominican Republic, led by President Hipólito Mejía, I extend a cordial greeting to all delegations present and especially thank the United Nations for convening this special meeting of the General Assembly dedicated to examining the role of information technology and communication in development.

The Dominican Republic has 8.8 million inhabitants and covers an area of 48,000 square kilometres. It occupies a strategic location — in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, in the Western Hemisphere — where it serves as a gateway to South America, Central America, Mexico, the United States, Canada and, naturally, to the ensemble of islands that constitute the Caribbean Community.

I am from a country that has enjoyed democratic stability for the last 40 years. That — combined with an economic development oriented towards the service sector, diversified manufacturing and high technology — makes it an attractive nation for foreign investment, along with a skilled environment in such important areas as that of telecommunications.

The Dominican Republic provides a very interesting case to analyse when dealing with the development of telecommunications. Telecommunications have been privatized for 72 years — since 1930. The State has no interests or participation in the sector through State companies offering telecommunication services. The liberalization of the sector has made possible the presence today of five companies, foreign and national, which, with their investments, have given the Dominican Republic one of the most advanced telecommunication infrastructures in Latin America. As of December 2001, our country has a telephone penetration rate of 25.4 per cent.

The robustness of the telecommunications sector, one of the most dynamic sectors of the Dominican economy, is due to the Government's comprehensive reform of the legislation regulating the telecommunication industry. With the cooperation from the International Telecommunication Union, the General Law on Telecommunications was approved on 27 May 1998. The law created the Dominican Institute of Telecommunications, the regulatory agency for the sector, with very clear and specific objectives: to promote universal service through the Telecommunications Development Fund; to regulate all

aspects of the radio spectrum in the country; to promote and to ensure the exercise of the rights of the users of telecommunication services; and to ensure the development of free and fair competition in the sector.

This labour was carried out following three basic principles: first, the principle of minimum regulation, which dictates that the State should intervene only when necessary; secondly, the principle of transparency, which requires that all actions and decisions of the regulatory body are open to examination by the general public in accordance with the due legal process; and thirdly, the principle of technological neutrality, which stipulates that the State should not dictate which technologies are to be adopted but should only ensure the quality of service offered to users.

With this union of responsibilities and cooperation shared between the public and private sector, the Dominican Republic is successfully moving towards meeting current and future challenges. That is why the Government has made its education policy one of its fundamental priorities, with the aim of ensuring that more than 2 million students in the country have access to the benefits of the Internet's information highway. In the Dominican Republic there are 400 information technology laboratories in the public schools, thanks to contributions from the private sector. As well, the Technological Institute of the Americas has the goal of training a labour force capable of manufacturing advanced technology products in the Cybernetic Park of Santo Domingo.

In order to narrow the digital divide, the Government of the Dominican Republic is carrying out through the Telecommunications Development Fund efforts ranging from the installation of rural public telephones to projects in telemedicine, tele-education and the installation of community telecentres. They make use of information technology and telecommunications to contribute to the strengthening of education and health in the country.

Despite the efforts made by the public and private sectors, among a population of approximately 2 million public students, there is an average of only one computer for every 350 students. We are therefore exploring the possibility of encouraging the transition from analogue television to digital television by 31 December 2006, since the penetration rate of television in my country and the rest of Latin America is greater than that of computers.

The right to knowledge is an inherent right of all citizens regardless of race, sex or economic status. Exclusion contributes to a sense of despair. That is the last thing we in developing countries want. We need to gain access to technology at a reasonable cost in order to expand our citizens' horizons in the information society, whether it be by means of computers, television or other electronic media.

That is why the Government of the Dominican Republic welcomes the convening of this meeting of the General Assembly and hopes that the World Summit on the Information Society scheduled for 2003 will make it possible to further unify the efforts of all countries in the search for mechanisms on content, for the respect of intellectual property rights and for the reduction of the digital divide.

The birth of the information society represents one of the most important challenges of the twenty-first century. I call for the unity of the telecommunications sector to face the challenge, which must be met by strengthening education, by establishing clear and transparent regulations enabling the greater competitiveness and the greater participation of the private sector, and by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by telecommunications and technology in building a better society favouring our collective well-being.

Mr. Jalang'o (Kenya): My delegation is delighted to participate in this General Assembly debate devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development at a time when access to and the transfer of knowledge of technology have become basic development requirements in both industrialized and developing countries.

My delegation fully endorses the statement made this morning by the Chairman of the G-77 on behalf of the G-77 and China. In this connection, I wish to underscore the importance of ICT as stated in the 2000 Havana Declaration, in the United Nations Millennium Declaration, in the Digital Opportunity Task Force mandated by the G-8, and in the speech made this morning by the President of Senegal on Africa's own home-grown initiative, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, and in the 2000 ministerial declaration of the Economic and Social Council.

All the aforementioned declarations and observations emphasize the important role of ICT. However, the real situation in the developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, confirms the existence of a wide digital divide, which must be seriously addressed.

More than 4 billion of the world's people are currently excluded from participating in or benefiting from the information revolution. It is true that ICT is not an end in itself; rather, it is a means to an end. We therefore welcome the establishment of the United Nations ICT Task Force, and we call upon it to liaise with other stakeholders in bridging the social and economic gaps that divide the South from the North and those within the South itself, and to suggest achievable and practicable approaches to the problem.

Kenya is preparing to leverage information technology in its national priorities of growth and poverty reduction and to strategically position itself for the global digital economy. Recent key actions include: mainstreaming information technology in the national planning and budgeting process by co-opting key stakeholders in policy and strategy development; partnering with the private sector for infrastructure improvements; and the Government's recent steps to substantially increase information technology in its own operations, particularly in the context of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper.

The primary impetus for growth in information technology must come from private enterprise. Accordingly, the current plan envisages the role of government as primarily that of a facilitator for creating an enabling environment where the energies of the private sector and of civil society can be most effectively deployed. The Government's objective is to put in place a package of policy measures and incentives that will make Kenya one of the most attractive investment destinations. We note that the Internet and the availability of affordable computing solutions have reduced many of the geographic boundaries that formerly hindered the development of information and communication technologies.

The case for digital modernization is indeed compelling. It presents an opportunity for a country to benefit from the rapid growth of global connectivity and to leapfrog conventional obstacles to development goals, especially in poverty reduction. The focus is not so much on technology, but rather on using technology to improve the lives of people through its catalytic and leveraging effect on education and health interventions, on global markets and on market opportunities. It has thus become an indispensable tool in the fight against poverty by providing opportunities to support vital development goals far more effectively than conventional strategies.

The information technology industry is one of the fastest-growing economic sectors in Kenya, and therefore we plan to provide affordable access, especially to underserved urban, rural and remote areas. Priority will thus be given to the deployment of a basic infrastructure; to universal access to citizens, including through publicly available facilities and complementary means; to education; to e-government; and to systems and Web content development. Our mission is to be at the forefront of the development and application of information technology in Africa and to promote an e-enabled society.

Infrastructure is perhaps the single most important overall e-community enabler for residents, businesses, health-care facilities and educational institutions to thrive in a digital economy and society. As the next generation of information technology unfolds, rural communities in particular face significant access challenges. Individual rural communities have little bargaining power with Internet providers. The Government will therefore explore ways to facilitate aggregation of demand by region to attract providers.

Many declarations and commitments have been made in the past decade without the slightest sign of being honoured. The most glaring example is the commitment made by world leaders during the World Food Summit, held at Rome in 1996, to reduce by half the number of undernourished people, which then stood at 800 million, by 2015. According to current statistics, the number of hungry people in the world has been reduced by only 6 million, instead of the goal of 22 million, per year.

As our leaders declared in Rome last week, we are not asking for alms. Africa is asking for a level playing field for trade issues, for the opening of markets, for the transfer of technology and for the removal of protectionist barriers as we continue to liberalize our economies as dictated by global trends.

We applaud the many initiatives currently being undertaken by United Nations agencies and by other

international organizations that are in partnership with the private sector to address the increasing information gap between industrialized and developing countries. We are ready to forge alliances and partnerships with all those organizations — including non-governmental organizations — as long as the partnerships do not undermine or weaken our positions in international policy-making processes. In that connection, we applaud the Italian Government's pilot initiatives on e-government in five developing countries — Albania, Jordan, Mozambique, Nigeria and Tunisia — and we appeal to other Group of Eight (G-8) members to provide funding to expand the programme to other African Governments in areas such as the media revolution.

As the preparatory process commences in Geneva in July 2002 for the two phases of the World Summit on the Information Society — to be held in 2003 and 2005, respectively — my delegation appeals to the United Nations ICT Task Force to collaborate with other stakeholders for the rapid narrowing of the currently wide digital divide. We appeal for support in building the ICT infrastructure for reopening the gates to universal and equitable access and to human resource development.

Finally, it is through bridging the digital divide that currently separates us that the developing countries will be enabled to fight poverty, reduce the number of people who suffer from hunger and decrease the proportion of people who have no access to or cannot afford safe drinking water.

Mr. Gansukh (Mongolia): At the outset, my delegation would like to join the preceding speakers in expressing its deep appreciation to the President, for the timely convening of this high-level meeting devoted to one of the most pressing challenges of our time. We would also like to express our gratitude to the Economic and Social Council for bringing the issue of information and communication technologies for development into the agenda of the United Nations at the right time.

My delegation expresses its gratitude and appreciation to the Secretary-General for his thought-provoking and inspiring statement at the opening of today's meeting, as well as to the President of Senegal for his keynote address.

We fully associate ourselves with the statement made this morning by the representative of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, and we express the hope that that it will serve as a basis for consideration of the various aspects of the issues on our agenda.

In addition, I would like to make the following brief comments.

Mongolia, like many other countries, believes that this special meeting is of great importance in addressing the challenges of the growing digital divide in the context of globalization and development. We expect that this meeting will promote coherence and synergy between various forms of ICT at the regional and international levels. It is also my delegation's hope that our meeting will make an appropriate contribution to preparations for the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society. That Summit is expected to address the wide range of issues concerning the effective and equitable growth of the information society, and to help shape a common vision and a comprehensive understanding of this societal transformation, with broader participation by representatives of public and private sectors as well as of non-governmental organizations.

From this perspective, Mongolia also attaches great importance to the various ICT initiatives under way — for example, the ICT Task Force and the Digital Opportunity Task Force created by the G-8 summit in Okinawa. Mongolia, together with other Member States, welcomed last November the formation of the United Nations ICT Task Force, as set out in the 2000 Millennium Declaration. The Task Force aims to contribute to the building of digital bridges for the two thirds of the world's population that has little or no access to the benefits of the digital revolution. It is a new body, and therefore, in my delegation's view, it would be premature to expect concrete results at this initial stage. However, the expansion of its membership to the broader international community would, in our view, be helpful in achieving its lofty goals. Furthermore, if the United Nations ICT Task Force assists Member States in the creation of national task forces and encourages cooperation among them, this would make its work more comprehensive.

The Mongolian Government attaches high priority to development of the ICT sector and is making every effort to mainstream ICT into its national policies as an important factor in its economic, social

and human development. The Mongolian Parliament approved in 2000 "The Concept of ICT Development in Mongolia for the period up to 2010". The concept serves as the basis of the medium-term strategy for the development of ICT in Mongolia. The main objectives of the concept consist of defining a policy and legal framework; infrastructure development; human capacity-building; and business and private sector support. Each sub-topic covers a broad and complex set of policies, goals and measures. Mongolia has also established a national ICT Committee involving all stakeholders.

Within the framework of the specific goals just mentioned, during the past few years the Mongolian Government has taken some important measures in cooperation with international organizations. As a result of those measures, 91.3 per cent of the entire inter-urban network has been automated; transmission and switching facilities have been upgraded to modern digital technologies; and the capacity of fixed-telephone users has increased by 15 per cent. However, in Mongolia, a country with a vast territory, low population density and weak infrastructure development, the Government needs financial and technological assistance to realize the goals defined in the medium-term strategy. Moreover, my delegation believes that the experiences of some of the developing countries that have successfully developed and introduced ICT at the national level can serve as case studies for other developing nations. Mongolia is prepared to offer its experience for that purpose.

In conclusion, I would like to underline once again the importance that Mongolia attaches to this meeting, as well as to its two informal panel discussions, and to express my delegation's readiness to work together in bringing our work to a successful conclusion and in implementing its follow-up activities.

Mr. Chiriboga (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): First of all, on behalf of the delegation of Ecuador, let me congratulate you, Sir, and express our certainty that your professionalism and leadership will enable this Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development to achieve concrete results for the benefit of our peoples.

The extraordinary evolution of information and communication technologies poses a challenge and at the same time offers one of the greatest opportunities our countries have ever had to overcome underdevelopment. It is our obligation to meet this challenge of destiny with statesmanship and foresight, ensuring the appropriate and intelligent use of this magnificent tool to overcome the barriers of underdevelopment and poverty.

The change is so defining in nature that we have left the confines of the industrial economy and arrived at an information society. The transfer of knowledge and information was always one of the greatest constraints on our development, since it prevented us from participating fully in the global economy. Information is vital to achieve progress in our societies, and today we have it at our disposal.

The President of Ecuador, Mr. Gustavo Noboa Bejarano, is convinced of the need to expand the use of ICT through the Internet to every part of Ecuador. He has repeatedly affirmed the need for our country to overcome all of its limitations and break down all barriers in order to make use of this tool. The President has said that an illiterate person today is not just someone who does not know how to read and write, but someone who cannot use computers.

Until just a few years ago, the Internet was the domain of a few academics. Today it is used even in the most remote villages of our countries. It is with profound satisfaction that I see the increasingly widespread use of the Internet in Ecuador, since I myself was involved in its establishment and launching there.

The Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, speaking on this subject, said that it was essential to bring these technologies to the 3 million human beings who have never even used a telephone. Nothing could be truer. If we want to take a leap past our constraints, if this vision of a world of connectivity can lead to an excellent education, a new base of knowledge and culture and a new way of producing and competing, we will have created jobs, wealth and well-being. We will have overcome poverty, which is one of the worst violations of human rights because it destroys hope and dooms human beings to despair.

The Secretary-General has steadily developed greater links between the United Nations and academic centres, technology companies and civil society, which should contribute to this effort. But I strongly believe that the effort must come from us. We must understand

that our peoples — with their enormous cultural traditions and universal values — can, despite the poverty and limitations to which they have been condemned by an unfair international system, overcome the barriers of protectionism to reach the levels of well-being to which they are entitled. The only way to do that is to use the tools of this new technology to leap to a new stage of development with the intelligence and knowledge they possess in abundance. I trust in the humanity of our peoples, and I look to this challenge with confidence that we will know how to use that new technology freely, transparently and with wisdom.

The potential of using electronics in medicine, education and trade is just emerging. We must make an effort to make sure that our peoples can be involved and so that they can understand that this vision of the future is not necessarily a form of slavery and hegemonic domination, but rather an opportunity afforded humankind by history.

When I see my own children and other young people use the Internet, I have trust in a better future. When we can create links of dialogue between peoples and cultures and when we can go beyond geographical differences of thousands of kilometres, to say nothing of prejudices, then I believe optimistically in a new era.

The heads of State or Government of the American hemisphere, gathered at Quebec, Canada, in April 2001, issued a declaration on connectivity that recognized the value of this tool in strengthening democracy and the progress of our peoples. I believe that we should examine and agree about the way in which the United Nations can lead the effort to open the way for less developed countries in this regard. But the United Nations must also be reformed to become a centre for the spread of information and communication technologies. We cannot allow this Organization of the peoples of the world to lag behind in technology as compared to other sectors. The United Nations must be a leader in the technological revolution, as it must essentially be used for the benefit of the human beings of the planet. We must give a human face to technology.

I would like to conclude with an invitation to reflect upon what has been said here about the enormous potential this subject holds for the future. We cannot accept the inertia with which we deal with matters involving our peoples. It is imperative that we promote, as soon as possible, a re-engineering of the hearts and minds of our peoples so as to take hold of the reins of our own destiny and utilize our immense capacities and human potential to meet the mandates of the Charter and to make the dream of a better future come true.

Mr. Henningstad (Norway): The information revolution has changed our world in a fundamental way. In most developed countries the private and the public sector, as well as non-governmental organizations, have become dependent on global information flows and rely on cellular phones, satellite television and computers as indispensable tools for rapid access to information.

Developing countries should also have the opportunity to participate in the this modern information society. In part they do. There is hardly a single developing country without highly skilled people running web sites, information services and private information and communication technologies (ICT) enterprises. These are often young and enthusiastic people, but they are much fewer than they should be and they are often handicapped by limited bandwidth, scarce infrastructure and high prices. Developing countries are in need of both foreign investment and development assistance to address these disparities and to enhance their local capabilities.

One of the slogans at the demonstrations in Genoa, Italy, last summer, was that the hungry cannot eat computers. That reminds us that the fundamental problems of the developing world are still poverty, disease and illiteracy. Computers are just tools that can help us combat those conditions and, as tools, they require advanced skills and quite sophisticated supportive infrastructures. But with the right conditions and prerequisites in place, computers and other ICT equipment can be very powerful tools in helping us solve the more basic problems of development.

In our view, the main focus should continue to be the fight against poverty. But through concerted efforts by the international community to address the digital gap, and by integrating ICT into development cooperation, we will be able to combat poverty more effectively. However, poverty reduction is not necessarily about targeting the poor specifically. It is just as much about creating employment and economic surpluses that can be redistributed, which of course requires that social distributive policies be in place and

that Governments have an overall commitment to poverty eradication. ICT has the potential to create jobs, improve access to basic services and increase the sharing of information between people living in different parts of developing countries.

But access to this technology is still limited in most developing countries, and today we have heard good analyses and explanations about why that is so. One thing is sure: Governments, aided by donors, need to finance infrastructure and provide seed money and loans for information hubs.

The main principles of Norway's development policies for supporting the use of ICT in development strategies and in combating poverty are as follows. ICT should be regarded as a tool in reaching the Millennium Development Goals. It should be integrated wherever it is expedient and feasible. ICT should be integrated to support the main objectives of our development cooperation: social development, economic development and the promotion of peace, democracy and human rights in environmental and natural resource management and when it comes to women and gender equality. To make successful use of ICT, the partner countries must, through plans and analyses, recognize the benefit of, and possibilities inherent in, ICT as a tool for development.

We have initiated and participated in pilot studies regarding the use of ICT in development programmes in several countries, including Sri Lanka and Tanzania. Integrating ICT into our development programmes, in close cooperation with partner countries and multilateral organizations, will continue to be a high priority, because this is a field that requires good coordination among all actors. We will also continue to look at particular areas such as education, health and private sector development, and at applying a regional and country-specific focus to analyse more thoroughly the potential of ICT in development.

We know this meeting will make a substantial contribution to increasing our understanding of how to address the widening technological gap between richer and poorer countries. We also know that the result of these discussions will serve as useful input to the World Summit on the Information Society to be held in 2003 and 2005.

Mr. Kerim (the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia): The decision to convene a meeting of the General Assembly devoted to bridging the digital divide and promoting digital opportunities in the emerging information society, which was contained in resolution 56/258, was a clear confirmation of the central role of the United Nations, and in particular of the General Assembly, in the promotion of partnership in the context of globalization.

In convening the World Summit on the Information Society the United Nations has managed to grasp the opportunity to take the leadership role in promoting synergy and coherence among all efforts directed at expanding the development impact of information and communication technologies (ICT). The Government of the Republic of Macedonia considers this meeting of the General Assembly devoted to ICT to be a very important step in the preparatory process for the World Summit. It will help formulate strategies for the development of ICT and lend a truly global dimension to efforts to bridge the digital divide and to foster digital opportunity. Furthermore, ICT will firmly facilitate the development of the necessary strategies.

Taken together with two other summits — this year's International Conference on Financing for Development, which took place at Monterrey, Mexico, and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, scheduled to take place at Johannesburg later in the year — the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held at Geneva in 2003 and at Tunis in 2005, can be regarded, in the context of globalization and the overall development process, as a landmark new approach in dealing with the challenges of today's world as well as in meeting the Millennium Summit goals.

The adoption of resolution 56/183 marked the beginning of the initial preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society, endorsing, inter alia, the leading role of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in the process. I should like to take this opportunity to endorse the report of the Secretary-General of the ITU on the ongoing preparatory process (A/57/71), particularly with regard to the proposed themes for the World Summit set out in paragraph 15 of that report.

During its coordination segment, the Economic and Social Council made an important contribution to identifying ways of enhancing the effectiveness of the Organization's role in promoting development with respect to access to and transfer of knowledge and

technology — especially ICT — through partnerships with relevant stakeholders, including the private sector. The forthcoming substantive session of the Economic and Social Council in New York will certainly focus attention on promoting the required dialogue among all actors, particularly within the Global Knowledge Partnership, in order to lay the foundations for a truly global and empowering knowledge and information society.

The principal mission of the United Nations ICT Task Force, as rightly pointed out by Secretary-General Annan, should be to spread ICT throughout the world and make its benefits accessible and meaningful to all of humanity. In supporting such an approach, my Government believes that the Task Force should provide a global forum for national, regional and international ICT for development issues through multi-stakeholder partnerships.

At the national level, ICT plays an indispensable role in creating a global knowledge-based economy, accelerating growth, raising competitiveness, promoting sustainable development, facilitating the integration of all countries into the global economy and, finally, eradicating poverty.

By overcoming many of the disadvantages of distance, information technology offers a huge opportunity to help marginalized regions to connect to the world economy. A landlocked country such as my own would surely have a comparative advantage in ICT-based service exports, such as software, data transcription and telemarketing, as against export-oriented manufactured goods. In that context, I would like to draw attention to the Republic of Macedonia's experience with ICT so far.

As a newly emerging democracy with a transitional economy, my country has opted for a development strategy based upon an advanced communication infrastructure. This infrastructure provides a sound basis for building a variety of information and communication services. In addition to the existing network and communication infrastructure, the main goal of ICT for development is to build web-based information systems in the following key areas: e-government, e-commerce, e-banking, distance education and health care, and the environment.

The President of the Republic of Macedonia, Boris Trajkovski, has launched an initiative entitled "E-Macedonia for all", with the aim of undertaking activities that will enable the country to become more closely integrated into the information society and the networked economy. In order to ensure the implementation of this initiative, the President has established a committee composed of experts in the areas of education, administration and banking, as well as representatives of computer companies. The committee has recently drawn up recommendations, in the form of an e-declaration, for the speedy development of an information society and a digital economy in the Republic of Macedonia as a matter of national priority. The recommendations contain, inter alia, proposals to establish a national agency for information technology; to prepare a national strategy for the development of an information society; to draw up legislative measures and instruments for standardizing ways of saving, exchanging and using electronic data; to provide tax relief for retail businesses engaged in e-commerce; and to introduce web domains and e-mail addresses for companies and institutions at the national level.

The fact that 45 per cent of science and technology parks worldwide are engaged in information and communication or related technologies is an important indicator in the evaluation of the role of ICT among new and emerging technologies. The rapid advances that are being made in new and emerging technologies in such fields as information, telecommunications, the environment, clean energy, health care, materials and transportation, as well as the increasing pace of globalization, are imposing a new social and ethical responsibility on the scientific and technological community — the responsibility to direct applications of these new developments in ways that strengthen efforts to achieve the goals of sustainable development.

The past decade has been marked by two extraordinary developments whose impact and implications are still being digested. At the political level, democracy — understood both as a system of government and as a value system commanding the support of ordinary people — has expanded greatly throughout the world. Simultaneously, spurred by major new developments in ICT, the ways in which people and societies can, and do, relate to each other are being rapidly transformed. The ethical dimension of science and technology should not, therefore, be neglected in our deliberations on ICT.

In that respect, I consider it appropriate to quote the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Koichiro Matsuura, who stated:

> "In the digital age, equality in terms of the dignity and rights of all human beings requires that ever-greater vigilance and protection be exercised against the propagation of all forms of violence and aggression and against incitement to racism, xenophobia and all other types of behaviour that infringe human rights."

Let that message form the core of the guidelines for the preparatory process for the World Summit on the Information Society.

The importance of ICT to the process of globalization, and especially the linkages among trade, finance, investment and development, cannot be overemphasized. In recent years, the consistency and focus with which the General Assembly has been addressing the issue of globalization in all its complexity testify to its determination to advance the debate from a general understanding of the nature of globalization and its policy implications, through addressing its major individual components, such as ICT, to a comprehensive and integrated analysis aimed at producing action-oriented decisions and recommendations.

Globalization has made the task of pursuing development even more complex than before, primarily because of the increasing interaction among various characteristic components. Precisely for that reason, it is necessary to ensure coherence and complementarity between the Plan of Implementation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Monterrey Consensus on financing for development on one hand, and the use of ICT for development on the other. This must become one of the key issues for the United Nations system and its agencies, and especially for the General Assembly in its future activities.

Mr. Paolillo (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): As a member of the Group of 77 and China, Uruguay endorses the statement made this morning by the Vice-Minister for Science and Technology of Venezuela on behalf of the group.

The revolution in information technology is taking place in world that is so deeply divided that its impact varies greatly from place to place. In the industrialized countries, the new information technologies act as an engine of economic growth, social development and higher standards in the fields of education, culture and the arts. The developing countries, on the other hand, lack the resources that would allow them to participate effectively in the information society. For them, the spread of the new information and communication technologies (ICT) poses a two-fold challenge. On one hand, developing countries have limited access to these new technologies, which constitute the core of a new way of global organization. This has created a digital divide at the international level that threatens to accentuate even further the marginalization of their populations and their economies. The percentage of Internet users on the two sides of this divide speaks for itself: between 33 and 50 per cent in the industrialized countries and only 0.4 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa.

Moreover, owing to differences in access to the new technologies among social sectors in developing countries, there is an internal digital divide within their societies that has both social and productive dimensions. Each State, therefore, has a responsibility to incorporate into their national development strategies programmes aimed at ensuring that the new information technologies contribute to the attainment of development goals, by mainstreaming them into, inter alia, their educational, scientific, health, economic and political systems. States also have the responsibility to establish transparent legal and regulatory frameworks and to introduce appropriate policies that enable all sectors of society, and particularly those with the least resources, to access the new technologies.

But just as State action at the national level is crucial, it is also necessary to ensure the effective participation and cooperation of international organizations and financial institutions and the firm commitment of the national and international private sector and of scientific and academic circles. The United Nations must play a key role in promoting synergy among all stakeholders, including the private sector, by coordinating national efforts and playing a leadership role in helping developing countries to obtain maximum benefits from the use of modern information and communication tools.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, some Governments have launched initiatives to provide Internet access to the lowest-income sectors through

schools and community centres. The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean started out in 1998 with less than 1 per cent of the population connected to the Internet. That figure then rose significantly, and we are currently the fastest-growing Internet community in the world.

The countries of the region have been working together since June 2000, when at the initiative of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Government of Brazil, they met in Brazil to prepare their participation in the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council on development and international cooperation in the twenty-first century. At that meeting, it was agreed that by the year 2005 the countries of the region would be full-fledged members of an information society characterized by efficiency, equity and sustainability, within a global knowledge-based economy.

In order to ensure continuity in the debate on the subject, the first Latin American and Caribbean information and communications technology workshop was held on the island of Margarita, Venezuela, in November 2000. The workshop identified common needs for project formulation and approved four regional programmes in the areas of health, e-commerce, e-government and school Internet connectivity for education. This last programme, which is coordinated by Uruguay, seeks to establish, coordinate and supervise a comprehensive programme to promote access by children to the information society through public schools in all the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

At the workshop, Governments urged the international organizations in attendance, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and the Andean Development Corporation, to continue to support national and regional initiatives aimed at fully integrating the region into the information society. The coordination of activities in this field is undertaken by the IADB, ECLAC and the Governments of the region, in the framework of the United Nations ICT Task Force.

Uruguay is the country in Latin America that has the highest percentage of computers in the home — 19 per cent — and we have become a pioneer country for the effective integration of the information society with the economic and social development of the country. This has been done through the establishment of institutions at the highest level, including Uruguay en Red — Uruguay on the Net. With this institution, which comes directly under the Office of the President of the Republic, the public and private sectors, as well as civil society, participate in an active and coordinated way in the incorporation and development of information technologies in key areas, with the objective, inter alia, of bridging the digital divide, improving business competitivity, enhancing the efficiency and transparency of the public sector and increasing connectivity.

Uruguay en Red represents a well-organized and effective institutional model whose starting point is the development of a strategy for the information society, with a view to implementing concrete measures of institution-building and putting in place projects and pilot programmes to demonstrate the application of information technologies in various spheres of development. This model is currently being used successfully in other Latin American and Caribbean countries in the framework of operational activities of the IADB.

In conclusion, we want to emphasize the need for serious commitment to measures to bridge the international and national digital divide. We believe that this commitment is essential if we are to attain the Millennium Development Goals. We appreciate the work of the Economic and Social Council, which put the issue of information and communication technologies on the United Nations agenda, and we welcome the establishment of the ICT Task Force and the adoption of its plan of action.

With their invaluable assistance, Governments, multilateral institutions, the donor community, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders must all work hard in the preparatory process for the Summit on the Information Society in order to promote immediate access by all countries and citizens of the world to information, knowledge and communication technologies in the service of development.

Mr. Hussein (Ethiopia): At the outset, allow me to congratulate the President on his leadership in the preparation of this timely and important meeting. My delegation fully associates itself with the statement made by the Chair of the Group of 77 and China.

Ethiopia welcomes the convening of the meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. We hope that it will enable the international community once again to emphasize the leadership role that the United Nations system should play in promoting synergy and coherence among all efforts directed at expanding the development impact of information and communication technologies. The launching of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force was a first step in this direction.

It is widely recognized that information and communication technologies play an important role in the development efforts of developing countries. Indeed, access to, and dissemination of, modern technology has the potential to increase the pace of development far beyond what we have witnessed in the past. There have been two previous major technological revolutions that dramatically changed the welfare of the human race. The first one was the industrial revolution, and the second was the green revolution in agriculture. In our view, the advances in information and communication technologies constitute the third and latest technological revolution.

As was the case with the first advances in technological innovations, information and communication technologies remain highly concentrated in the developed economies, thus creating a huge digital divide between the developed and the developing countries. In fact, I have just come from chairing a panel at which the point was made, and accepted, that the question is not always that of a divide between countries. Indeed, within all countries — including the least developed, such as mine — there are elites, and the divide is actually not that great between them and the elites of the developed countries. But there are sectors within society itself, even in the developed economies, in which the digital divide is actually quite large — relatively the same as one would find in the developing or least developed countries. How to bridge this gap will therefore constitute one of the focal areas for the international community.

ICT can play an important role in the integration of the developing countries into the global economy. Thanks to advances in ICT, access to, and diffusion of, knowledge and production techniques have never been easier. In the case of the African continent, therefore, the promotion of ICT is for the purpose not only of bridging the digital divide, but also of enabling the long-delayed transfer of science and technology. Indeed, during the opening meeting this morning, President Wade made a case for this when he spoke of the New Partnership for Africa's Development.

The Secretary-General himself stated in his report to the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council in 2001 that the ICT revolution does indeed provide the opportunity to leapfrog stages of technological development.

Ethiopia has launched an information and communication technologies capacity-building programme. We have a national road map for ICT development efforts, with the ultimate goal of establishing nationwide connectivity, in partnership with the United Nations system. In order to bring about this development at the grass-roots level, Internet points are planned that will facilitate district-level development activities, with an emphasis on women and children. I am sure that the Ambassador of Jamaica will be very happy about that. The emphasis on children in particular we believe to be important, since we are talking also about technologies of the future.

If developing countries are fully to participate in the knowledge-based global economy, there is an urgent need to bridge the digital divide. Tapping into information and communication technologies in turn requires the active participation of all stakeholders, including, most importantly, the private sector. It is therefore imperative to forge partnerships with civil society stakeholders. Such partnerships, we believe, should also have a strong development dimension.

In conclusion, we hope that this meeting of the General Assembly on information and communication technologies will provide valuable inputs for the international community's preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in December 2003 in Geneva and December 2005 in Tunis. These meetings, we hope, will focus on concrete actions and programmes geared towards integrating the peoples in the developing countries into the knowledge-based global economy.

In order to help to conclude this afternoon's meeting, I have cut out various parts of my statement. However, the text of the entire statement can be found on the Ethiopian web site.

The meeting rose at 6.05 p.m.

United Nations A/56/PV.103

General Assembly
Fifty-sixth session

Official Records

103rd plenary meeting
Tuesday, 18 June 2002, 10 a.m.
New York

President: Mr. Han Seung-soo ..... (Republic of Korea)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Agenda item 12 (*continued*)

Report of the Economic and Social Council

Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development

Mr. Prelog (Croatia): First of all, let me take this opportunity to thank you, Mr. President, for convening this important meeting devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development, because, as stated in the United Nations Millennium Declaration

> "the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world's people". (*resolution 55/2, para. 5*)

Indeed, information and communication technologies are definitely crucial to resolving this challenge, as was also emphasized by the 2000 ministerial declaration of the Economic and Social Council, where it is stated that

> "We recognize a wide consensus that information and communication technologies (ICT) are central to the creation of the emerging global knowledge-based economy and can play an important role in accelerating growth, in promoting sustainable development and eradicating poverty in developing countries as well as countries with economies in transition and in facilitating their effective integration into the global economy." (*A/55/3/Rev.1, chap. III, para. 17, pp. 19-20*)

Bridging the digital divide is also one of the goals in the Secretary-General's road map towards the implementation of the Millennium Declaration. Therefore, speaking in the name of the Croatian Government, I would like to assure the Assembly that we regard ICT as the most pervasive generic technology of the present time. I will thus report on the current status of the ICT sector and information society in Croatia. Additionally, I will speak about the Croatian Government's activities and efforts to improve the present situation. I believe that Croatian problems are similar to those encountered in other countries, especially those with economies in transition, and that the experiences gained by various countries should be shared to mutual benefit. This is also a reason why I commend the convening of this Meeting.

Let me now give a brief report on the current status of the ICT sector and information society in my country. Croatia is a Central, Mediterranean and South-East European country with a population of about 4.5 million people. Its gross domestic product (GDP) amounts to $22 billion, or slightly less than $5,000 per capita. The total ICT market value amounts to 7 per cent of GDP. The installed base for personal computers is estimated at 600,000 units, which represents approximately 13 units per 100 inhabitants.

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-178. Corrections will be issued after the end of the session in a consolidated corrigendum.

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The telecommunications environment is characterized by 1.8 million fixed lines and 1.4 million mobile lines; that is to say, 40 fixed and 31 mobile lines, respectively, per 100 inhabitants. Internet access connections are estimated to be at 325,000 units. The total number of Internet users is more than 500,000 — some say it is even 600,000 — thus giving an Internet penetration rate of at least 12 per cent of the population, and perhaps even 13 or 14 per cent. Taking into account both business-to-consumer and business-to-business end-use, e-commerce value is $1 million annually.

The information technology area of the Croatian economy is completely privatized. Several large and a number of medium and small companies exist and operate relatively successfully. The telecommunication market is partly liberalized, that is, there is only one fixed-line operator and two mobile operators. The technological level of the telecommunication infrastructure and the level of professional experience are satisfactory and, I would say, better than in other countries with economies in transition.

There are several Internet service providers, but they all depend on the same fixed-line telecommunication operator. The best diffusion and the most advanced level of service has been achieved within the academic community, where a 10-year tradition of using the Internet already exists.

Governmental and public information systems are mainly closed within their own sectors, with little interoperability and lacking a unified interface. Government and public institution web pages are common, but e-commerce and e-administration are still in initial phases.

I shall now talk about the efforts made by the Croatian Government in the last two years to improve the situation.

At the beginning of this year, the Government adopted its ICT strategy, which is called "Bringing Croatia into the twenty-first century". The Croatian Parliament has approved the strategy, which is fully compatible with the eEurope Action Plan of the European Union. Of course, that strategy takes our local circumstances into account. It gives the Government 17 recommendations, which are in turn further refined into activities with known actors and deadlines.

In the year 2000, the Croatian Government established the Office for Internet Infrastructure Development. Under the direct control of the Deputy Prime Minister, this small office coordinates ICT activities performed by various ministries and hired private institutions. So far, the office has mainly been preoccupied with the information infrastructure of Government bodies. In the future, it will take a leading role in implementing the recently adopted ICT strategy.

At the end of 2001, the Ministry of Science and Technology delivered project proposals for building a private network connecting all Government bodies, including the Parliament and the President's office. The proposed network would speed up the internal functioning of government structures and would provide a common government Internet portal to the public. The network is now under construction. Part of the network already implemented serves to conduct electronic sessions of the Government, where all materials are prepared in electronic form and ministers use their monitors instead of standard documentation.

At the beginning of this year, the Croatian Parliament adopted the electronic signature bill, which fully complies with European Union directives. This act will enable electronic document flow among Government bodies and public institutions, and it will stimulate e-commerce in general. Other European Union laws in the area of ICT exist as draft proposals; for instance, there is a data protection act and a new version of the telecommunication act.

In order to stimulate the growth of small and medium enterprises and academic entrepreneurship, the Ministry of Science and Technology has recently launched a technological development programme called HITRA. With a yearly budget of about $10 million, the Ministry finances promising development projects and innovative production plans.

Some important things could also be said about the Croatian Academic and Research Network (CARNet), which has recently become a fully integrated part of the European GEANT project. A GEANT pop-up node now resides in Zagreb, and it will probably serve to link the academic networks of other neighbouring countries with GEANT.

Croatian academic institutions are now connected with their European counterparts by a 622 megabits per second link, which enables various forms of international scientific collaboration, including

distance learning and teleconferencing. Last year all Croatian primary and secondary schools were connected to the Internet by ISDN channels, as a result of collaboration between the Ministry of Education and Croatian Telecom.

Finally, I would like to mention that the Croatian Academy of Science and Arts, together with UNESCO, started an extensive ICT application programme in teacher education and training, the objective of which is to prepare more than 45,000 elementary and secondary school teachers to use ICT in their curricula. This programme also establishes a scientific, professional and methodological platform for the introduction of ICT at all levels and phases of the educational process in the Republic of Croatia.

I will now end my statement with the following conclusions.

Regarding the development of ICT, Croatia has certain advantages compared to other countries with economies in transition. For instance, it has a well-developed and technically advanced telecommunications network.

Over the last two years, after a period of stagnation, Croatia has been trying very hard to catch up with neighbouring countries. Relying on our own advantages, we have now succeeded in reaching Central European averages of ICT development indicators. Our expectation is that our country should take a leading role, at least in the South-East European region.

During the next period we plan to make major breakthroughs in the areas of e-government, e-education and e-health, gigabit academic networking and liberalization of the telecom market.

Recent experience has shown that, at least in our country, the private sector and market forces are still not strong enough to promote all digital opportunities. Therefore, the involvement of the Government and public sector remains necessary and welcome. Indeed, public-private cooperation is encouraged by the Government, and it is hoped that this will bear the best results.

Mr. Niehaus (Costa Rica) (*spoke in Spanish*): Today humanity stands at an unprecedented crossroads. During the past decade, the development of new information and communication technologies (ICT) has opened many opportunities for economic growth and social progress. Today the wealth and poverty of peoples and nations is determined by their capacity to implement and benefit from the new technologies. Thanks to the digital revolution, knowledge and information are nowadays the main source of wealth and development. In today's globalized world, success depends on our ability to adapt to circumstances and opportunities provided by the new technologies.

Nevertheless, the introduction of these new technologies has produced uneven rates of growth. Economic growth in developed countries has accelerated, while most developing countries have been left behind. At the same time, within each of our nations, the wealthier strata of society enjoy state-of-the-art technology, while the poorer strata of society find themselves unable to access it. The very speed and momentum of new technologies multiply their social and economic effects, and their tendency to dominate widens the digital divide. This is why we are gratified to see the General Assembly now studying how to narrow the divide and how to use technology for the enhancement of social and economic development in all our countries.

The digital revolution provides new opportunities for growth in developing countries. New technologies allow us to compete in the global market, increasing our productivity, while taking advantage of the economies of scale and increasing our competitiveness.

Furthermore, if we make wise use of these opportunities, we can close the digital divide within each of our nations and thus build fairer societies. But this is no easy task. In order to reap the greatest possible benefits from the digital revolution, we, the developing countries, must firmly and resolutely respond to the challenge that it presents. What is required is an exercise of strong political leadership to develop and implement a coherent development strategy based on ICT. Such a strategy should be efficient — in other words, it should use new technologies based on the best available technical standards. But it must also be fair; it must democratize access to new knowledge, and it should promote the development of human capital. Finally, such a strategy should become an ongoing, firm and proactive State policy that, in all its aspects, will leave its mark on our nations' future development.

It is indispensable for developing countries to guarantee the entire population access to new

technologies and to the tremendous wealth of information that is now available. We must build the necessary infrastructure to use new technologies and knowledge. We must adopt regulations and standards that will promote investment in these new technologies. We must creatively develop state-of-the-art technology and coordinate the efforts of public and private entities.

It is vital that we invest systematically and ardently in our human resources, devoting as many resources as possible to education. We must strengthen the level of knowledge and the creative capacity of our people, since they are our principal asset and the best instruments for placing us in today's globalized world.

My country, Costa Rica, is already applying a strategy of this type. We are committed to guaranteeing Internet access for all Costa Rican citizens, including people in rural areas. We have designed a project to establish an advanced Internet network with which we aspire to become one of the first totally wired countries. We would like to modernize the national telecommunications system by integrating voice, data and video services.

We are investing in high-capacity infrastructure, with broadband connections that will be compatible with existing platforms and also able to adapt to future technologies. We are connecting the country using high-capacity trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific cables, while extending our national fibre optic network. Our short-term goal is to arrive at DSL interconnection at a rate of 2.5 for each 100 inhabitants. We also have set up a national advanced research network called Internet 2 for graduate education and research.

My country promotes and welcomes investment in high technology. Thanks to our political and economic stability, our population's high level of education and the fact that we have many highly specialized and technical professionals, we have been able to attract important foreign companies. At the same time, we are promoting the local creation and production of advanced technology, and this is already yielding fruit. Indeed, advanced technology is our main export product and the most active segment of our economy.

Costa Rica seeks to extend the benefits of new technologies to the entire population. In the area of health, we are now promoting remote diagnosis, exchange of high-resolution medical imaging, distance training and cooperative projects with advanced medical centres. We are promoting distance learning and teaching, as well as the use of electronic libraries. We have provided universal access to e-mail, assigning every Costa Rican citizen an e-mail account. Public institutions have made all relevant information available on the Web, thereby improving the quality of public services.

The only way to close the digital divide is to enthusiastically embrace advanced technology. We cannot be left behind; we cannot let the opportunities that it provides pass us by. We must educate our people so that they can wisely use and benefit from the potential for growth and progress that are being made available. We must invest in essential infrastructure in order to become part of the new digital society. This unquestionably requires a strong political commitment. The choice is ours.

Mr. Htoo (Myanmar): My delegation would like first of all to thank the President of the General Assembly, Mr. Han Seung-soo, for taking the initiative to hold this important Meeting on information and communication technologies for development. It is not only timely, but also appropriate, for the Assembly to take the lead in bridging the digital divide. This new divide has not only resulted in the marginalization of people in developing countries, but also made them feel frustrated at being left out of the benefits of the global information society and knowledge-based economy. My delegation truly believes that this Meeting will help us to address the issue of the digital divide and generate the necessary political will to effectively pursuit this issue.

My delegation fully associates itself with the statement made at this Meeting by the representative of Venezuela, which currently holds the chairmanship of the Group of 77 and China.

"Information" and "knowledge" are keywords today for bringing economic development and reducing poverty throughout the world. However, information and knowledge are not disseminated equally or on an automatic basis. Advances in computer, Internet and communication technologies make it possible for people around the world to interact with each other, making the world a global village. Yet more than 4 billion people around the world are still deprived of new technological opportunities. People in urban areas are able to acquire information and knowledge

undreamed of by people in rural and remote parts of developing countries, where billions of people live. There is growing concern that the digital divide has widened further, instead of narrowing.

The major problem facing us is how to make information and knowledge available to underprivileged communities. In this regard, my delegation was encouraged by the various initiatives put forward by the international community aimed at bridging the digital divide, such as the Digital Opportunity Task Force, the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) Task Force, the ICT activities of the New Partnership for Africa's Development and so forth.

However, in our view these initiatives alone will not be sufficient to solve the problem. We share the view that concerted actions at the national, regional and international levels are needed to address issues relating to lack of infrastructure, connectivity, local content, capacity-building and investment to promote ICT. In this context, we join many other delegations in welcoming the initiative of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) to hold the World Summit on the Information Society in December 2003 at Geneva and in December 2005 at Tunis. My delegation would like in particular to commend the work of the United Nations ICT Task Force in promoting ICT for development applications, developing modalities to strengthen the ICT capacity of developing countries, assisting Member States in creating ICT strategies and policies and forging strategic partnerships between the United Nations system, private industry and other relevant international actors.

Appropriate national initiatives are also needed to supplement regional and international efforts. In Myanmar, the development and use of information and communication technologies are still at a nascent stage. Recognizing that ICT could leapfrog the economic development process, the Government is providing guidance, encouragement and necessary support and assistance for ICT development in Myanmar. The Government has established the Myanmar Computer Confederation, which has prepared an information technology master plan for Myanmar, as well as the Myanmar Computer Technology Development Council to promote ICT awareness and enhance the application of technology.

At the regional level, Myanmar, as a member of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), takes part in the e-ASEAN Framework adopted in November 2000 by the leaders of the ASEAN countries at the Fourth Informal Summit. In line with that Framework, the Government has established the Myanmar e-National Task Force, which has six working committees. Under the guidance of the e-National Task Force, efforts are being made for the development of e-commerce, e-government, e-education, the preparation of cyber laws and the improvement of the ICT infrastructure in Myanmar.

In 2001, a private sector initiative, the Myanmar ICT Park, was established with the collaboration of 30 local private companies. Equipped with an adequate ICT infrastructure, it is designed to compete in the international information technology market. A company called Bagan Cybertech IDC and Teleport was also established in 2000 to provide modern communication services to local and foreign information technology companies, as well as satellite links to create an Intranet covering the whole country.

The Myanmar Ministry of Education, with the contribution of the private sector and local communities, has also encouraged schools to install multimedia classrooms as effective learning and teaching tools. Almost 500 schools throughout the country now have multimedia classrooms, including computer laboratories. In 2001, distance learning for university students in Myanmar was reinforced by the provision of e-learning opportunities using electronic data broadcasting systems made available through satellite telecommunications. Without leaving their home towns, more than 300,000 students enrolled in courses offered by the University of Distance Education can now interact with professors at distance-learning centres nationwide in the course of their higher education studies.

The economic development potential of new information and communication technologies is enormous. However, the potential has yet to be harnessed fully for the benefit of the vast majority of people over the world. ICT have proved themselves capable of developing human capacity, creating and sharing knowledge, promoting health care, fighting infectious diseases, and fostering enterprises and entrepreneurship for sustainable development and reducing poverty around the world. The international community must make sure that this potential is fully

utilized for the benefit of the entire global community so that we can build a better world for the future.

Mr. Robles (Guatemala) (*spoke in Spanish*): We wish to speak in today's debate — associating ourselves with the statement made by the presidency of the Group of 77 and China — in order to present our country's perspective on the immensely important topic under consideration.

We have of late heard many opinions concerning the use of information and communication technologies for development. There is no denying that a tremendous digital divide separates developed and developing countries, and that disparities in access to digital technology exist also within countries. It also true, however, that information and communication technologies can bring about quantitative and qualitative advances, leading to very rapid progress that can help to bridge that divide.

We have likewise witnessed a profound change in telecommunications policies and regulations, and we have seen how continual technological advances have transformed the economy and people's lifestyles. For example, initiatives have been taken to increase transparency in public administration through technological modernization, and to streamline bureaucratic procedures through online services available to the public. This has been a source of concern for developing countries, which feel that they missed out on the industrial era but had hoped to be able to participate in the knowledge and information era.

This is reflected in developments that have occurred in my country. Indeed, some time ago the governmental telecommunications agency was privatized and relevant national legislation radically reformed. Thus our market now offers great opportunities, for it is deregulated and is governed by a simple and practical telecommunications law under which any company may provide the service that it is best suited to offer — the only requirement being that it register with the telecommunications authorities.

Some of the principal transnational corporations have already made large investments in the country, although those investments have been affected by the financial situation in which the sector finds itself worldwide. Nevertheless, the aggressive reform we have undertaken has already resulted in explosive growth in telecommunications services, as can be seen in the widespread use of cellular phones; the exponential increase in the number of Internet users; the constantly increasing use of informatics in the context of productive activities, particularly services; and the ever more widespread use of new technologies in urban centres and, in some cases, in rural areas.

Two facts relating to the narrowing of the digital divide are of special interest to the United Nations. The first is that the area we are dealing with is one that lends itself extraordinarily well to international cooperation. The second is that a great deal of cooperation will be required between public policy and civil society as a strategy to overcome the digital divide.

The issue of information and communication technologies for development should also be viewed from a broader perspective. On the one hand, they offer great potential for accelerating development, but, on the other, lack of development makes it impossible maximally to exploit them. For instance, in societies such as mine, the illiteracy rate remains high, with most young people failing to complete their basic education. Many people are still without basic services, and there is a great diversity of regional languages.

There are also cases in which students are more conversant with information and communication technologies than their teachers are. Thus the problem is not confined to the difficulty of learning the skills required to use the Internet, for instance. It extends to the difficulty of knowing how to use this source of information.

A further difficulty is the low purchasing power of people in developing countries. Affected as they are by the economic divide, day after day they must struggle to meet basic needs if they are to survive, and information and communication technologies do not have priority in their everyday lives. They cannot afford terminals, and, even if they do manage to overcome all of these obstacles, they will find that most of the available information is in languages they do not know.

Nevertheless, there are positive developments. With minimal technical assistance, cooperatives in the highlands of Guatemala, whose members usually have little or no formal education, are using information technologies to help market their products.

In the past, education was an important means for achieving development, but it has now become a fundamental factor in narrowing the digital divide and in making use of information technologies. Indeed, it is difficult to think of a way of narrowing that divide without considering ways and means of developing individual capacities. Though in many cases Governments have decided that telecommunications services are to be provided by the private sector, education is an area in which Governments must assume a leadership role, bringing into play all of their infrastructures to achieve comprehensive solutions, so that information and communication technologies can be used to the fullest possible advantage.

There is no denying that throughout history progress has given rise to needs that we did not know we had. Years ago, no one felt that a telephone had to be available at all times, and the same applies to automobiles and to television. We should never forget that progress and the development of the information society must serve the people, and that information must not be used to control people or invade their privacy.

We are aware of the challenge that all countries will be facing in future. We realize that many obstacles will have to be overcome, which will not be easy. There are also many risks. But we know also that this is an opportunity to achieve sustainable development, which will help us eradicate poverty. We have at hand a tool that, if properly used, can help us improve the quality of life of our citizens. Above all, the decisions and actions that we take will lead us to success or failure in the journey that we are making towards the information society.

Finally, we heartily welcome the prominence given this topic on the United Nations agenda. We believe that the efforts under way should continue — efforts which will culminate in the World Summit on the Information Society. We appeal to the General Assembly to keep this item on its agenda in order to advance international cooperation and development.

Mr. Stuart (Australia): I wish to congratulate you, Sir, on your country's latest triumph in the World Cup. It only goes to show how globalized telecommunications can span the digital divide. I should like to use this opportunity today to describe some of the practical steps which Australia has been taking to help narrow this digital divide.

The world has changed permanently as a result of the information revolution, and the pace of change will continue to accelerate. It is clear that this revolution provides enormous development opportunities. Reductions in production, distribution and transaction costs provide unprecedented opportunities for firms of all sizes to improve efficiency, compete more effectively and trade across borders. New forms of communication technology are ensuring that no corner of the world will be left untouched by globalization. The notion of a purely domestic market is becoming obsolete.

It is also clear, however, that there is a danger that the benefits of these new technologies could largely bypass many developing countries. With the greater opportunities to compete globally comes the need to be globally competitive, and greater demands are placed on firms in all countries to be global in terms of their communications, sourcing and selling capabilities.

Developing countries have great potential to compete successfully in the new global market, but risk being bypassed unless they embrace, and indeed are able to embrace, the information and communication technology revolution promptly and actively. What is needed is greater capacity so that these countries can take advantage of the opportunities.

The Internet creates new possibilities for developing linkages between people and between the developed and the developing worlds. But in order to bridge the digital divide, new technology must be harnessed and adapted to the needs of developing countries in their pursuit of poverty eradication. This echoes pretty much what we have been listening to in the debate in the last couple of days, including in the statements by the Group of 77 and many others.

What I would like to concentrate on is, as I said before, some of the practical ways in which Australia is trying to do something to help resolve this problem. Australia and the World Bank have recently embarked on an ambitious and major new international programme, which we call the Virtual Colombo Plan. This joint initiative addresses the causes of poverty through the use of information and communication technologies. Its major focus is to improve basic education and access to knowledge in developing countries through distance education and support for policy development using information and

communication technology. It also provides a new platform for education providers, research institutions and technology companies to share their knowledge and skills with our developing country partners.

Access to relevant development information, training opportunities for teachers and education managers and skill development for those formulating and implementing public policy are limited in many developing countries. While much progress has been made in terms of education access and achievements, pressures on education systems in developing countries remain great, especially at the basic education level. It is important to raise the percentage of children in school but it is not sufficient. The quality of education is also critical. Typically, poorer countries face significant constraints in the level of qualification of teachers, in the resources available to them and in the appropriateness in the teaching materials they can use.

At the post-secondary level, there is also great demand for access, including international training, and the provision of international and domestic training can itself be significantly facilitated, and at much lower cost, through using information and communication technology. So, support for improving education at the tertiary level is also urgently needed. There is a notable level of demand for specialized custom-designed short courses in many fields in both public sector and private sector institutions. These fields include law, operation of public utilities, audit, management, finance and human relations. In all of them, both in specific fields and in general, there are significant constraints to development in the lack of capacity in these areas. That is what the Virtual Colombo Plan is addressing.

ICT-based distance education and training is a fundamental component of the plan. In some cases, courses may be offered through distance learning centres, for example using video conferencing or computer or Internet facilities, and in others they will be offered to scholars located in areas of poverty that have very limited or no communications facilities. The challenge within the plan is to source appropriate modes of delivery for the various country and project requirements. Given that the existing focus of the Australian Government's development cooperation programme is already on poverty alleviation, it is natural that we should now try to find new approaches and innovations to ensure that our programme reaches beyond the traditional constraints.

Let me give some concrete examples of what the Virtual Colombo Plan has meant since it was launched in 2001. It has meant improving basic education in a number of developing countries — for example, in the Pacific island region in Fiji and Papua New Guinea — through both upgrading the skills of basic education teachers through distance education and improving government's capacity in this area. It has meant establishing a global distance learning network centre in China and assessing opportunities for establishing similar centres in other developing countries.

It has meant a programme of 200 virtual scholarships in financial year 2002-2003, undertaken in a range of countries. It has allowed Australia to join as a founding member of the Development Gateway Foundation, which we believe should become a premier means for the electronic exchange of information on development issues. We are considering establishing an Australian development gateway to make the development knowledge that we hold more easily accessible. It has also already developed and tendered projects to improve the capacity of the African Virtual University so that it can deliver quality relevant courses that address Africa's development needs.

The Virtual Colombo Plan will use the Internet to provide education to people in many developing countries. It will bring real benefits to children and to community groups in developing countries. We have committed $200 million over the next five years to support the Plan and the World Bank has also made a strong financial commitment to it. We hope that this example of donor partnership will serve as a catalyst for further funding from other countries.

I would like to make a few comments about the World Summit on the Information Society, which will be held in December 2003 in Geneva, and which will culminate in December 2005 in Tunisia. The Australian Government considers that the Summit will be an important forum to consider the themes of cross-border electronic commerce, the application of intellectual property rules, the standardization of electronic security and ensuring the free flow of information. The new technologies that have created the new information society have had an impact not only on the way that we do business, but also on how we relate to people of different languages and cultures. The growth of the Internet raises questions, however, about the balance between a completely unregulated flow of

information and restrictions in the interests of societal objectives. This new society bears risks such as from a tax on information infrastructure and the exposure of harmful content, for example to children.

In coming to terms with the information society, we need, as a global community, to carefully consider how to maximize its benefits, including through the removal of impediments to trade and the encouragement of balanced copyright regimes that encourage creativity, investment and innovation, while mitigating any downsides. We believe that the World Summit promises to be a constructive step on the road to understanding in this area.

Mr. Kim Chang Guk (Democratic People's Republic of Korea): Today information and communication technologies (ICT) are advancing at a speed that is beyond our imagination. The rapid advance of information and communication technologies has contributed to great achievements in economic, social and other areas, and tremendous change is being witnessed in human life. At the same time, information and communication technologies may bring about further marginalization of developing countries, causing the so-called digital divide, which we cannot overlook.

My delegation hopes that this meeting devoted to ICT for development — one of the important issues for international attention — will make a significant contribution to the preparatory process of the upcoming World Summit on the Information Society. With respect to this opportunity, my delegation also welcomes resolution 56/183 and resolutions and decisions adopted by the International Telecommunication Union, by the Economic and Social Council and by other relevant institutions and organs of the United Nations with respect to the World Summit on the Information Society to be held in 2003 and 2005. Likewise, my delegation appreciates the leading role played by the International Telecommunication Union in the preparation of the World Summit.

My delegation is of the view that ICT should not produce further marginalization of countries, but should benefit everyone and substantially contribute to achieving the international development goals and targets that are spelled out, inter alia, in the Millennium Declaration.

The World Summit on the Information Society not only should assess the development trends of countries and exchange experiences in the area of information and communication; it will also have to focus on fully engaging all countries, particularly developing countries, in the ICT field and on helping them make substantial social and economic progress by making the most of the advantages of ICT.

In order for ICT to be a genuine means of development, it is necessary to raise awareness of the information society and to ensure a favourable environment enabling the full application of ICT based on a sound infrastructure. Today, attention to ICT has, by and large, increased not only in developed countries but also in developing countries. However, developing countries have been challenged in their efforts to build their capacity and to introduce ICT extensively in the economic and social fields due to problems attributable to a lack of financing, technology and the necessary equipment.

Therefore, the roles of the International Telecommunication Union, of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and of other relevant bodies of the United Nations system need to be strengthened, giving priority to improving the capacity of developing countries in the field of ICT.

To that end, relevant United Nations bodies will have to constantly improve the structure of cooperation on ICT in keeping with the speed of advances in ICT worldwide and with today's realities. Financial resources such as the UNDP ICT Trust Fund should be encouraged and further strengthened, giving priority to developing countries in the allocation of funds. Fair cooperation should be extended, including the full dissemination of ICT and the transfer of ICT equipment. There are a considerable number of organs and bodies related to ICT in the United Nations system. However, they are deemed to be not adequately adapted to the reality of today's world of information technology, and the transfer of advanced ICT to developing countries still faces various obstacles. Unless such obstacles are removed, ICT may be monopolized by some countries and cannot be a genuine means of development for all. Expert-level human resources training and the strengthening of international exchanges and cooperation are also of importance in the field of ICT for development. Particular attention needs to be given to the training of ICT experts in developing countries and to encouraging

seminars, workshops and training programmes at the regional and international levels.

Under the wise leadership of the great leader General Kim Jong Il, who has foreseen that the twenty-first century will be the era of the information industry, strenuous efforts are being made for the development of ICT in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea considers the development of ICT to be one of its most important fields and, based on a properly-designed ICT development plan, is striving to increase ICT investment and to fully introduce ICT in all areas of the national economy.

The Government has taken measures to expand and to modernize information and communication infrastructure in every region of the country, in accordance with the rapid evolution of ICT; to add or to enhance ICT research centres and teaching faculties in various educational and academic institutions; and to enhance the education of talented students in computer-related techniques and to produce numbers of technical experts commensurate with the development of ICT, thus drawing the attention of the entire nation.

In order to become familiar with international trends in ICT and to strengthen exchanges with other countries in the field, my Government has organized various scientific seminars and exhibitions on ICT and will host an international forum and exhibition on contemporary ICT in Pyongyang on 28 and 29 June 2002.

My delegation hopes that the preparatory session to be held in Geneva in July will make a good start on preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society and that satisfactory overall results will be achieved in the preparatory process of the Summit. My delegation will be fully engaged in the preparatory process and will strive to ensure that the World Summit on the Information Society will impart real impetus to development in the twenty-first century.

Mr. Bhattarai (Nepal): Mr. President, permit me to begin by congratulating you on the wise and timely initiative of the Assembly to reflect collectively on issues concerning information and communication technologies (ICT) for development; I am honoured to participate today.

Coming after the Economic and Social Council's thematic deliberations on ICT in 2000 and its later establishment of the ICT Task Force, the present meeting will go a long way in bringing the gift of ICT closer to the billions of people who are still outside its virtuous reach. My delegation is encouraged by the enthusiasm generated, both within the United Nations system and outside, in response to resolution 56/183. It is crucial that the United Nations take an active role in forging global ways and means to ensure that the digital revolution also help overcome the digital divide.

Yesterday, the Assembly heard the collective voice of the developing countries. Nepal fully subscribes to the statement made on behalf of the Group of 77.

The potential of ICT to create wealth and job opportunities, to promote health and education and to eradicate poverty make it one of the most useful tools for realizing the Millennium Development Goals. The question is now how we direct and channel the unprecedented power of ICT towards facilitating the economic development and social progress of humanity.

With the ICT revolution as its engine, the wave of globalization has already touched every aspect of modern life. Yet, millions of people have never heard a dial tone. Clearly, the impact of ICT at present is mixed at best. On the one hand, superlative innovation has tremendously enriched the stock of knowledge and the means to make a difference for all. On the other, it has further widened the already macabre digital divide between rich and poor, between cities and villages, between men and women and, above all, between nations. An open exchange of views and commitments is urgently needed to help strengthen our resolve in addressing the digital divide in a more fruitful manner. Debate on the structural aspect of a global ICT scheme may also be necessary to address the roots of our difficulties with the present system.

The benefits of ICT are contingent on their accessibility, which is heavily skewed to the disadvantage of the poor countries. Most of those countries are so poor that they cannot afford on their own to introduce ICT on a full scale. Even when they do — as some have tried — their inability to keep their technology up to date with the striking pace of innovation renders the technology they have acquired obsolete in almost no time, thus incurring huge disadvantages instead. In the process, those countries are very often shown the bright face of ICT

advancement and, once hooked, are beaten to the ground by its commodity character. The question of the choice of technology increasingly adds to the dilemma.

On the whole, a just and equitable global ICT system is perhaps the only way to fashion a durable remedy to these dilemmas. Such a system would also be conducive to raising investment in the economic and social infrastructure in developing countries to meet the needs of their burgeoning information society. For that, we must be prepared to make a radical departure from the way ICT know-how and assets are managed and distributed around the globe today.

More urgently, however, we must find ways to address the concerns of poor countries to help them join the global mainstream. We must respond to the desperate need for concerted efforts to utilize the benefits of ICT advances for development with short-, medium- and long-term strategies. That is where genuine partnerships, South-South cooperation and regional and global synergies to build on a coherent strategy are required most.

In that context, Nepal welcomes the proposal to hold the World Summit on the Information Society in two phases, in 2003 and 2005. The Economic and Social Council, the United Nations ICT Task Force and the Group of Eight's Digital Opportunity Task Force, which have emerged as promising forces for the delivery of effective results in reducing the digital gap and in promoting ICT for all, have an even larger role to play. We call upon them and upon all other actors that have the ability to contribute positively to this process to come forward and to help build momentum in favour of ICT for the development of all.

We believe that the World Summit on the Information Society can be instrumental in addressing the gamut of ICT issues to ensure, without delay, digital opportunity for all in the realm of global and regional cooperation. We also believe that developing countries' need for digital opportunity, and the obstacles to ensuring that they have it, will attract sufficient attention at the Summit. As always, it is our hope that support will be forthcoming for the least developed countries to prepare themselves for the Summit.

I hasten to add that the private sector has been the driving force behind the incredible pace of ICT development. Since its active support and participation will be critical to ensuring the success both of ICT advancement and of the Summit itself, the participation of the private sector, and that of academic and research institutions from developing countries, in the World Summit on the Information Society will be essential.

Despite Nepal's strong enthusiasm for promoting scientific knowledge for development and for accelerating the pace of its social and economic progress, my country began its journey on the road to the ICT sector fairly recently. The first e-mail service was introduced in 1994, followed by the creation of a separate Ministry of Science and Technology in 1996. The introduction of three private-sector Internet service providers the same year opened a new vista for the sector and acted as a stepping stone for the integration, albeit limited, of Nepal into the global knowledge-based society.

More recently, the country has focused its attention on expediting the process, particularly in the area of ICT. A policy and institutional framework has been put in place for the advancement of the sector. The enactment of the Telecommunication Act of 1997, and through it the establishment of the Telecommunication Authority, has provided the impetus for ICT development in Nepal. While a telecommunication corporation is responsible for ICT-related service delivery in the field, the Telecommunication Authority ensures overall supervision and policy coordination at the national level.

The Government has also introduced very small aperture terminal (V-SAT) technology for data transmission, followed by mobile/wireless local telephone services in the private sector. The private sector's growing engagement has resulted in a better quality of service, lower Internet access charges and an increased number of e-mail and Internet users in Nepal. Two years after the introduction of Internet service providers to the country, the number of e-mail accounts exceeds 5,000 and that of Internet accounts exceeds 10,000. Realizing the tremendous opportunity that ICT provides, His Majesty's Government formulated its information technology policy in 2000, opening prospects for e-strategy, e-commerce, e-governance, e-education and other e-opportunities.

At the national level, the Government is working to promote, facilitate and regulate information technology (IT) development. Incentives have been offered for foreign and domestic investment. The

Government also plans to establish an information superhighway to keep itself abreast of the fast-changing trends in the IT sector. In addition, the process for establishing an IT park has been initiated.

More recently, the Government formed a National IT Development Council, headed by the Prime Minister, and an IT Development Committee began working under the chairmanship of the Minister of Science and Technology for expeditious implementation of the Government's policy. The establishment of a venture capital fund and the enactment of a cyber law are also under way. Nevertheless, the present level of 11 Internet service providers, which are providing Internet service for more than 40,000 users, is far from satisfactory when compared with the country's needs and potential. Also, the private sector is in need of international partnerships to build and sustain confidence in its capacity to develop an ICT infrastructure at the local level.

The developing countries are trying to follow the trend of global ICT development, though they need to do more work and to acquire more resources and more capability to keep pace with the fast-changing world of information technology. The United Nations high-level panel on ICT and the Digital Opportunity Task Force were able to identify the basic problems of the digital divide and to recommend remedies. Global support for an IT policy to improve connectivity, to build human capacity and to promote and develop e-commerce and an e-network is the core element for utilizing ICT for development.

A comprehensive plan comprising the training of an economically active population and the parallel establishment of a cyber-education system at schools and colleges needs to be implemented. My delegation sincerely hopes that this meeting and the forthcoming Summit will address such crucial issues in a holistic manner to yield concrete and coherent results in terms of improved accessibility, enhanced human capability and greater utilization of ICT in the development of the neediest sectors of our countries and societies.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize that developing countries have the potential to contribute to the promotion of ICT and to apply ICT to their development. Nepal believes that a serious international approach, as well as sincere and sustained external support, will have catalytic effects in making a difference in developing countries, both for the development of ICT and for its utilization in development. We believe that, if we take this event as a concrete starting point in the process of preventing the widening of the gulf, of bridging the existing gap and of enabling countries such as mine to get a good start in the process, it will not be long before we can revolutionalize the pace of development, with ICT as its lifeblood.

Mr. Bennouna (Morocco) (*spoke in French*): At the outset, the delegation of Morocco would like to thank you, Mr. President, for having initiated this process of discussion on information and communication technologies (ICT). You planned it in the initial programme of your presidency, and I must say that the debate yesterday and today has been timely, coming at a time when the international community, the United Nations and the private sector have finally become aware of the importance of ICT as the principal vehicle of development, as President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal again reminded us yesterday.

The Moroccan population — as perhaps some are not aware — are very open and receptive to ICT. That is why the Moroccan Government, to stimulate this movement, recently opened a technology park in Casablanca, designed to provide outreach to all the new Moroccan start-up companies in order to help them get under way and to participate in development. The Casablanca technology park — if we are to believe the media — is becoming one of the most successful in Africa.

Although this debate is a recent one, and one that is taking on increasing importance with the burgeoning of the Internet, it is nevertheless necessary to recall that this discussion is an old one as far as the transfer of technology is concerned. The debate goes on, despite the fact that until now no concrete results have been achieved in this area. This is why in today's discussions — and in the future — we must be mindful of the fact that for the developing countries, it is not simply a question of ICT but also one of new technologies in general in their global dimension.

The world of globalization which we are living in today has surely been characterized by profound changes that have stemmed from scientific and technological development based on a revolution in ICT. This revolution presents a challenge, but it is also

an opportunity to be grasped for all the developing countries, precisely because of the importance of these technologies and the opportunities provided by them to speed up access to information and to be in step with what is happening in the more advanced world. This is why we have said that these technologies have been a source of comparative advantage and that we should exploit them for development.

Of course, digital technologies are not a panacea for all problems, but they can contribute to creating a climate conducive to foreign investment. Also, they make it possible to create jobs, and they provide important prospects for growth and exports. They are also a tool with a multiplier effect and can facilitate reduction in cost and improvement in the quality of goods and services.

As far as education is concerned, we have frequently heard it said here that there can be no doubt that ICT will make it possible to develop literacy, to make it possible for everyone to have access to knowledge, possibly to combat pandemics and even to promote traditional cultures and identities.

It is accepted that ICT can contribute to a country's political development and improve the management of public affairs by making it easier for citizens to participate in political life and to follow, and even to monitor, the behaviour of elected officials. Consequently, this can be a very positive factor in democratization. Technology can also make it possible to bring local structures closer to the central authorities.

But, unfortunately, as we are all aware — and this is also the purpose of this Meeting — most countries, if not the vast majority of them, have not been able to benefit from these technologies up until now, and most of these countries experience difficulties in getting access to it. The disparity in development levels, of course, is one factor that has accentuated what is now called the digital divide, which has unfortunately grown wider and which may have irreversible consequences if solutions to it are not provided as quickly as possible. It is for this reason that we would like to thank Korea for this initiative. We are very pleased at the prospect of the Summits to be held next year and in the year 2005.

Obviously, the African continent is one of the most affected in this connection, with the most problems, where the rate of ICT penetration among the public at large unfortunately is very low and may further impede Africa's development. According to the United Nations Development Programme, the entire African continent has only 1,300,000 subscribers with direct Internet access. Of these, 250,000 are located in North Africa and 750,000 in South Africa. This leaves barely 300,000, a very small number, for the rest of the continent. Likewise, the total number of Internet users is approximately 4 million people and would be only 1.5 million if we excluded South Africa from that count.

The weakness of infrastructures is undoubtedly one of the reasons for this lag. In 1999, the African continent had only 18 million telephone lines, and only 17 countries of the some 50 that exist had Internet access in towns and urban centres.

Something has to be done to remedy this situation. We must try to correct these imbalances, and the international community must give some thought as to what measures must be taken to meet this challenge of the twenty-first century.

For this, the United Nations must support the developing countries, first to plot out their own national strategies, drawing, of course, on what has been done elsewhere. Likewise, these countries have to be helped, because the private sector cannot on its own set up the necessary infrastructures for ICT. Similarly, we have to tackle the essential question of financing all these projects and programmes. I have just referred to infrastructures and to programmes to draw up national strategies. The recent Monterrey Conference has already considered this matter. National resources must be mobilized, but at the same time we have to pay attention to the debt burden, how to increase official development assistance, how to encourage foreign investment and, finally, how to enable developing countries, particularly the African ones, to have more natural access to developed markets.

Cooperation in the United Nations has a central part to play in all this to make it possible for the public at large to have access to these major information and communication technologies. Therefore, the United Nations must support the developing countries, particularly the least developed ones, in their efforts so that they are not completely marginalized and left by the wayside in today's world. The United Nations is called on to play a leadership role in this area. There is no alternative for coordinating all the activities of

specialized agencies and international organizations that deal with ICT.

We welcome the creation at the beginning of the year of the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force. I believe that the Task Force is doing useful work; it should be encouraged to persevere and to elaborate United Nations guidelines in this area.

Mr. Balzan (Malta), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The private sector plays an indispensable role in developing and disseminating such technologies, but government policies should stay in step with what is being done in the private sector. As I pointed out earlier in relation to Morocco, Governments have a part to play in providing incentives to facilitate technology transfer to developing countries. Such technologies carry the hope that the modern world, with its various cultures and civilizations, can be made accessible. They are therefore an essential factor in what today is being called the dialogue between cultures, and they might also be useful in helping to combat extremism.

There could be also, however, a danger that they might lead to social imbalance in the countries involved. That is why we must have a global approach that takes into account the sociocultural aspects of the transfer of ICT. Although such technologies might make possible advances, they could also produce an imbalance in traditional societies. We must therefore develop certain ethical principles in order to avoid the kind of dysfunctional relationships that might evolve within the information society. This is something that UNESCO is working on, and there must be coordination with UNESCO in this respect.

In conclusion, it is our earnest hope, as we have said in earlier meetings, that the Summit on the Information Society, scheduled to begin at Geneva in 2003 and to continue at Tunis in 2005, will be very helpful. I believe that it will provide us with excellent prospects for the next three years. We must ensure that the summit meetings are successful and that they become a point of departure for a new era in which no one is excluded from or left behind in the world that we are creating. This will depend on our efforts; it will depend on serious preparations for the Geneva Summit.

Mr. Chowdhury (Bangladesh): At the Millennium Summit our leaders pledged to free the world from poverty and underdevelopment. They committed themselves to ensuring that the benefits of information and communication technologies (ICT) are made available to all. Indeed, that was not the first time such a commitment was entered into. Five decades earlier, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights underscored the right of nations to share in scientific advances. Yet two thirds of humankind are excluded from the opportunities of the digital revolution. The vast majority of people remain untouched by this miracle. Without immediate steps to bridge the digital divide, developing countries will be further marginalized within the global society. This is not just a fear — it is a fact.

Revolutionary advances in information technology are transforming the economic and social matrix of the world. This is changing the way we work and the way we live. It is pervading almost all human activities; it is breaking barriers to knowledge; and it is expanding participation. We have high hopes that this new technology will lead to healthier lives, greater social freedoms, increased knowledge and more productive livelihoods.

The ICT revolution, intertwined with globalization, has created the network age. This has enhanced possibilities and increased socio-economic rewards for the entire world. To benefit from this, every country needs the capacity to understand and adapt global technologies to local needs. National policies alone will not suffice. We therefore stress the need for international initiatives, as well as for the fair use of global rules to harness the resultant opportunities.

Technological development is a critical determinant of economic growth. It is an essential component of sustainable development in today's knowledge-based global economy. Unfortunately, such know-how is still concentrated in a few countries. Indeed, it remains confined to a few firms. This monopoly over technology acquisition also leads to control over the pricing of products and services and places developing countries at a greater disadvantage.

Our objective is to establish a democratic and inclusive information society. We aim to promote digital opportunity in the developing world. We intend to apply it in areas like e-government, e-commerce, health services, distance education and human resource development. Information technology has the potential

to empower civil society, buttress democratic institutions, strengthen the pluralist ethos and make Governments more efficient, transparent and accountable.

We know that bridging the digital divide will require concerted measures from a whole range of actors. In our view, a consensus on strategic priorities and commitment by the various stakeholders are essential to confront this challenge. Governments, the private sector, civil society, local communities, international organizations and donors all have a role to play in creating a favourable digital environment. New information technology has enormous potential for the promotion of economic and social development, once basic conditions are in place.

The experience of Bangladesh shows how this technology can be effectively applied. It extends even to regions in the country that lack power and other infrastructure. The challenge is to design it for the right job. The Grameen phone programme is a unique case in point. It has connected some 10,000 villages in Bangladesh, all of which were previously without telephones. This innovative use of cellular technology replaces the more expensive and time-consuming ways of collecting information. It now enables more than 15 million people in rural areas to relate to the outside world. It allows them to receive information on market prices, on health-care services, on job opportunities and even on how their relatives are faring. In short, it has vastly improved their quality of life.

Bangladesh intends to harness the benefits of ICT for further socio-economic development. It is formulating a national policy for the development of this sector. The policy aims at developing an efficient information technology infrastructure and a large pool of professionals to meet the needs of local and global markets.

Steps have already been undertaken to modernize the telecommunications sector, the backbone of information technology infrastructure. We encourage donor agencies, non-governmental organizations and other development partners to help in the necessary capacity-building. We believe that we are taking the right steps and going in the right direction. This positive trend inside the country has to be matched by international cooperation. We are hopeful that Bangladesh will serve as a software development area — a miniature Silicon Valley — if the plans can be successfully implemented.

Today Bangladesh is in the midst of a massive societal transformation fired by such innovative home-grown ideas as micro-credit and non-formal education. We have begun successfully to tap our own intellectual resources, and the information technology revolution will assist this process. Women are being increasingly associated with this. We believe it will help mainstream gender, a priority social objective in Bangladesh. The resultant social benefits will be enormous, which will assist us in our quest for modernization.

We are happy that the role of information technologies in the new century is high on the agenda of the United Nations. We welcome the establishment of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, comprising Governments, multilateral development institutions, private industry and foundations. The Task Force, in coordination and partnership with other forums such as the G-8 Digital Opportunity Task Force, the SoftBank emerging market, the Global Knowledge Partnership and others can provide overall leadership. It can help devise a strategy for future global information technology development. Such positive cooperation will enable many developing countries to leapfrog stages of development. The blessings of information technology can indeed be legion.

The upcoming World Summit on the Information Society must address the issue of the digital divide in the context of globalization and development. It must deliberate on the broadest range of questions concerning information. It must arrive at a common vision and understanding to ensure an effective and equitable global information society. It must help promote coherence and synergies between regional and international ICT initiatives. Ways must be found to aid developing countries to seize the opportunity. Only then will the purpose of the Summit — to build a truly global network age — have been achieved, and humanity will have marched together, to the same drummer, into the twenty-first century.

Moments ago, in the Economic and Social Council Chamber, Harry Belafonte said:

> "The world still breeds life and hope, and much of it is owed to the United Nations."

The success of the United Nations in inspiring the information technology revolution would further invigorate that life and fuel that hope.

Mrs. Loemban Tobing-Klein (Suriname): May I add my voice to those that have already, in the course of this debate, expressed words of praise and admiration for the President's excellent leadership and initiative in organizing this timely and significant meeting. My delegation wishes also to associate itself with the statement delivered by Mr. Rudolf Römer, Vice-Minister for Science and Technology of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, in which the information and communication technologies (ICT) revolution quite rightly was recognized as an effective instrument in the areas of economic growth, knowledge, education at all levels, eradication of poverty, empowerment of people, capacity-building, decision-making and promotion of sustainable development.

The Secretary-General should also be commended for his timely initiative, within the United Nations system, to create the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force, which is playing a vital role in the preparatory process for the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in December 2003 in Geneva and in 2005 in Tunis.

In December 1994, while I was carrying out my duties during my first assignment at the Mission of the Republic of Suriname to the United Nations, my two sons, who are ICT specialists, insisted that they would teach me how to make use of computers and their information and communication capacities.

Since then, my world and the world around me has changed drastically. I must confess that it would not have been possible for me properly to fulfil my duties and responsibilities as a representative of my country without the use of e-mail, the Internet, ICQ Chat, Webcast, videoconferences, and so on. I have discovered since then that I would have been underdeveloped — and I mean it — as a human being had I not followed the wise advice and lessons of my sons.

The importance of its ability to have access to the entire world, to visit world libraries, to meet, and to discuss and negotiate, via the electronic highway, the most complicated subjects has strengthened my conviction that the time has come for those responsible for the development of peoples and nations to create and realize a global ICT system. Such a system must give the necessary ICT access, knowledge and tools to every human being and to every country, large or small, developed or developing, least developed or landlocked, in order to — as the representative of the Group of 77 and China said earlier — immediately, in an effective and innovative way, address the growing digital divide, which can become wider with every passing day.

Information and communication technologies must be considered as essential for the sustainable development of peoples and societies, as we have accepted that development cannot take place if humankind is not provided with adequate food, housing, safe drinking water, education and health care. The rights-based approach to development has been universally adopted, and that approach should also include the right to information and communication technologies.

My delegation is grateful to, and would like to thank, the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly for the background documents, and especially for the report of the Economic and Social Council for 2001, which contains important information in chapter V — Coordination segment — on the role of the United Nations in promoting development, particularly with respect to access to, and transfer of, knowledge and technology, especially information and communication technologies, inter alia, through partnership with relevant stakeholders, including the private sector.

My mission has been greatly helped by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in creating e-mail addresses, home page possibilities and training facilities for all States Members of the United Nations since 1995, and we wish to thank it for its efforts.

I would note here that the question of universal and equitable access to ICT and to education are especially important for our countries.

My delegation welcomes the Thematic Trust Fund established by UNDP as a flexible instrument to strengthen UNDP's response to requests for assistance from countries. My delegation is very interested in the Global Cooperation Framework (GCF) and in the services provided to Governments, civil society and country teams for the implementation of ICT programmes in their respective countries.

The $5 million contribution from the Government of Japan, which has been made available for UNDP's first Thematic Trust Fund for Information and Communication Technology for Development, launched by Mr. Mark Malloch Brown, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme in Tokyo, on 31 October 2001, has given rise to important possibilities for our countries. As Mr. Malloch Brown stated on that occasion: "ICT provides powerful tools and can serve as a critical enabler to achieve many of the development goals agreed to by world leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit."

Since no more than 10 per cent of all ICT and Internet users live in the developing countries, it is most urgent that we immediately begin to bridge the digital divide with ICT projects in those countries aimed at addressing the most urgent needs in the fields of poverty eradication, education, capacity-building and, in general, mainstreaming ICT into the development agenda, as a number of delegations have suggested.

UNDP's Digital Opportunity Initiative, a public-private partnership, and the Group of Eight (G-8) Digital Opportunity Task Force, aimed at addressing the digital divide — the latter launched with the support of the Japanese Government at the G-8 summit and approved by the G-8 leaders last year — are very promising, especially in the interest of the poorest and most marginalized groups. Also important is the fact that UNDP and the World Bank are co-hosting the Task Force secretariat.

On 30 October 1995, the Republic of Suriname entered the global information highway with a short statement by President Ronald Venetiaan, who, as President of Suriname, invites all Internet users to enter the homepage of Suriname on the Internet at www.sr.net. Various civil society organizations and the University of Suriname are developing programmes focused on creating the necessary infrastructure and ICT networks. Various donors — among others, the International Development Bank, the Organization of American States, Belgium and the Netherlands — are supporting existing initiatives. Successful projects are the computer training centre for older persons and computer education programmes for schools and other education centres. Suriname, however, needs the tools and the support to develop a project for the entire country, including the interior and other districts, for which distance learning should be developed.

On various occasions at international forums, the President and the Minister for Foreign Affairs have also requested special attention for the widening digital divide and have spoken of the necessity to create digital opportunities for all.

The possibilities described during this important meeting by representatives of various Governments such as the Government of Japan, the Republic of Korea, Canada and, this morning, the Government of Australia with the Virtual Colombo Plan — as well as by representatives of the private sector, among others, during the breakfast discussions this morning under the capable leadership of the Chairman of the Working Group on Informatics, the Permanent Representative of Kenya — are very promising. My delegation looks forward to a constructive dialogue regarding possible support.

The Government of Suriname intends to participate in the upcoming regional ICT conference in Uruguay, to be held from 17 to 21 July, on the theme of ICT and poverty, and it will be grateful for follow-up of the discussions in that regard.

The preparatory process of the upcoming World Summit on the Information Society and the Summit itself can and must make the badly needed difference with regard to information and communication technology for all.

Mr. Pongwane (South Africa): It is indeed a great honour for me to represent the Government of the Republic of South Africa at this meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. My delegation fully associates itself with the statement of the Group of 77 and China.

ICT is a key priority programme of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and South Africa's President, Thabo Mbeki, has given strong support to strategies that enable communities to leapfrog into the age of the information society.

It was indeed heartening for us that, at the end of May, in a global partnership programme begun in 1998 in Senegal, a submarine cable around the west coast of Africa was completed, facilitating inter-African traffic. This has enhanced what NEPAD seeks to achieve. It is ironic, though, that the cable covers the west coast of Africa and southern Africa, leaving what the United Nations has recognized as the least developed countries

of our continent — the east coast of Africa — with very little infrastructure. We will need to create mechanisms to develop infrastructure in that vast area.

Inside South Africa, the President has established two important vehicles that attempt to formulate action plans and strategies for South Africa to bridge the digital divide. One of these is the Presidential National Commission on Information Society and Development, which is composed of South African and other African experts. The other is the Presidential International Advisory Council on Information Society and Development, which is composed of chief executive officers of major companies around the world. At the heart of those commissions is the fact that ICT is an important tool and an enabler for social development in Africa and, in particular, for South Africa. ICT cuts across all areas of development, such as e-agriculture; e-health; e-education; e-commerce; e-government and e-democracy.

Technological innovation and ICT are about social development and eradication of poverty. Many countries have their success stories to tell about the benefits and the use of information and communication technologies for human development. The utility of technological innovation in economic growth and improvement in the quality of life is beyond question. This is exemplified in technology growth hubs that bring about industry-academic collaboration, as seen in places such as Silicon Valley in the United States and Bangalore in India and in emerging areas such as El Ghazala in Tunisia, which are linked to development networks.

In South Africa too we have a story to tell with respect to small and medium-sized enterprises and the empowerment of local communities. The Government has recently formulated policies that ensure that in areas where teledensity is less than 5 per cent we are able to license small, medium and micro-enterprises to provide telecommunications services. In the last few years, there has been an unbelievable growth of kiosks and phone shops in previously disadvantaged communities of our country. Just recently, at the end of May, we issued an invitation for a second network operator to apply, and we have licensed centres to provide multimedia services in South Africa.

Governmental departments, the private sector and non-profit organizations have joined hands in the establishment and rollout of multipurpose community centres in rural communities. That successful partnership is a shining example of how ICT can be used to assist rural communities in bridging the digital divide.

The South African Council for Industrial and Scientific Research has established three centres in the North-West province of South Africa that are successfully implementing a project called ICT for Rural Development. One of its technical objectives is to create a regional intranet that will connect each of those sites with the Centre of Excellence in Mafekeng. The intranet will demonstrate how ICT can integrate remote rural communities into a network whereby centrally based information can be distributed to them. The project is intended to provide a communication platform for the delivery of local content, government and private-sector information services and health and education applications.

Another important undertaking is the Lubisi project. Community-driven and high-impact, it is an integral project employing a wide range of technologies to provide infrastructure and job creation opportunities. Through it, the people of 23 villages in the Lubisi area of the Eastern Cape province of the Republic of South Africa have been linked together. Its goals are the installation of an appropriate information and communications infrastructure; the packaging of information in support of rural development initiatives; the presentation of information in various delivery platforms; skills transfer and training; and the development of models for replication in other areas, including the Southern African Development Community region and other parts of Africa.

This year, our President instructed the Government to hasten the establishment of an ICT university in South Africa that will facilitate the development of human capital in South Africa and in the rest of the continent. We have taken measures to strengthen the Universal Service Agency and to increase its resources in order to ensure that we use ICT for the social development of our communities.

South Africa's Post Office has an extensive infrastructure of approximately 2,500 locations that is being increased to some 3,700 locations throughout the country. We are rolling out public information terminals, which will facilitate people's access to government information and to the Internet. A bill currently before Parliament addressing

e-communication and e-transactions would designate the Post Office a preferred authentication service provider for e-commerce by virtue of its infrastructure.

We have increased the rollout of community radio stations, the restructuring of public broadcasting and the expansion of the digital broadcasting infrastructure in South Africa. We have developed a plan to ensure universal Internet service, beginning with the development of a national address system, and we have stated that every child over 5 years old should have an e-mail address within the next seven years. We recognize that the key for using ICT for development is ensuring the existence of the necessary infrastructure backbone.

We wish to underscore the importance of the forthcoming World Summit on the Information Society, and we should like to take this opportunity to thank the host countries, Switzerland and Tunisia. We look forward to engaging with all participants during the preparations for that event. We trust that we will create the conditions for a World Summit that will build a truly universal and inclusive global information society in which there is a realistic chance for a better life for all. Recent initiatives and events in various parts of the world over the past year aimed at bridging the digital divide should serve as a reminder of our common responsibility to humanity and our duty to improve the lives of the world's people through ICT.

Mr. Kasemsarn (Thailand): My delegation wishes to express its sincere appreciation to the President for this timely meeting on information and communication technologies (ICT) for development, which we hope will contribute to our efforts to bridge the digital divide and to maximize the use of ICT in developing countries. In that regard, we wish to thank the President of Senegal for his presence and for his thoughtful and constructive remarks yesterday. The Thai delegation also wishes to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

Thailand attaches great importance to ICT as an essential tool for poverty eradication and for the achievement of sustainable development. ICT development in developing countries, such as Thailand, poses a great challenge. Are we equal to its demands, or is ICT too difficult and too expensive for us to cope with? One main reason for that challenge is that the convergence of computer and communication has transformed many countries into knowledge-based societies, where knowledge and good education are no longer optional. Some developing countries, on the other hand, are still being left behind because they are unable to invest in telecommunications infrastructure, in information technology (IT) equipment and in technical personnel. The digital divide will continue to widen unless government leaders commit themselves to a serious ICT development plan.

Thailand's development vision for the next 20 years focuses on eradicating poverty and on enhancing the Thai people's quality of life. The Thai Government considers ICT to be a major infrastructure for spreading information and for improving citizens' quality of access to it. Policies and programmes supporting ICT infrastructure development — such as the IT 2000 policy, the national IT policy framework for the next decade and the Government IT services project — have been formulated to accomplish that objective.

To address the problem of the digital divide, my Government has considered five key measures to narrow the digital divide and to create digital opportunities as one of the strategies in the country's ICT development. The first measure draws on the creation of information, or content, within the country in the Thai language. Content has come to be recognized as perhaps even more important than access as the tremendous impact of information technology on every aspect of society has become more apparent. In developing countries, IT's potential to benefit everyone will never be realized without the existence of useful and relevant content for all population groups.

The second measure is to increase the availability of low-cost personal computers. This project will enable people to buy personal computers and the associated open-source software at an affordable price, which will result in increased IT use.

The third measure is to broaden local telephone service, focusing on rural areas where the market situation is not attractive for private-sector investment.

The fourth measure is to establish telecentres in remote areas to overcome the high cost of IT equipment through the use of shared facilities in villages. The telecentre is designed to be a telecommunications centre for people in that community, enabling them to use telecommunications equipment to communicate and to distribute and

exchange information between the community and the outside world.

The fifth measure is the development of a machine translation service from English into Thai, and vice versa. The machine will assist users in accessing the information they want.

The obligation to support an equitable national information infrastructure (NII) is clearly stated in section 78 of Thailand's current Constitution. An NII act is being drafted in order to ensure our readiness to move into a networked society. In addition to the legal infrastructure, a ministry is being set up proactively to coordinate the country's ICT development.

It is believed that, with the implementation of the five priority initiatives I have just mentioned, the digital divide in Thailand will be reduced and digital opportunities simultaneously built up in the process of upgrading the quality of life of the people.

ICT has a very crucial role in sustainable development and in the achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. My delegation thus believes that the efforts of the developing countries to bridge the digital divide and to develop the use of ICT in their development should be met with international cooperation and support. In this connection, at the Fourth Asia-Europe Foreign Ministers' Meeting (ASEM), held at Madrid from 6 to 7 June this year, the Thai Foreign Minister proposed, inter alia, the creation of an ICT Performance Reference Forum and an ASEM e-education hub.

Furthermore, we must also bring together all relevant stakeholders at both the national and international levels, and involve especially the private sector. To this end, the United Nations has a unique and pertinent role to play. The launching of the United Nations ICT Task Force in November 2001 was therefore timely. The Task Force should, among other things, promote the international commitment to mainstream ICT in development assistance programmes and help mobilize the resources needed.

My delegation also welcomes the contribution made by the G-8 DOT Force, set up at the Okinawa Summit, and the Genoa Plan of Action, with nine priority areas, as a basis for developing countries to achieve sustainable ICT-enabled development, in both the economic and social areas. The work of the United Nations ICT Task Force and the G-8 DOT Force should reinforce and complement each other.

In closing, my delegation believes that our two-day deliberations will significantly contribute to the preparatory meetings for the World Summit on the Information Society, to be convened in 2003 in Switzerland and in 2005 in Tunisia. We believe that the Summit will provide another avenue for world leaders to renew their commitment to help bridge the digital divide and further to utilize ICT to achieve sustainable development and the Millennium Development Goals.

Mr. Gyorkos (Slovenia): It is a great honour for the country I am representing, and for me personally, actively to participate in this Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT).

General Assembly resolution 56/258 lists all relevant issues related to, and all possible consequences of, ICT for development. It is crucial to recognize not only the determinants that are critical for creating a global knowledge-based economy, but also the fact that the information and communication technology revolution poses both opportunities and challenges.

Slovenia is going through a period of intensive ICT deployment, and the initial effects of that deployment are being felt on society at large and on the economy. The resulting challenges are tremendous, because our economy is still in transition, and we are working to achieve the goals involved in the process of European integration. Slovenia is determined to play an active and cooperative role at both the regional and global levels, because we believe that the concept of an information society is of the utmost importance.

I should like to emphasize that the experience gained during the process of recognition and adoption of the so-called information society culture in countries that are candidates for European Union membership should be shared with other parts of the developing world. Exchanges of views on policy issues, best practices and benchmarking results all can contribute to the global knowledge base on information and communication technologies as a driving force of development.

The first progress report published this month on the occasion of the European Ministerial Conference on "Information Society — Connecting Europe", held

in Ljubljana, Slovenia, shows significant differences between the candidate countries. The progress report also indicates that there are diverse opportunities for sharing experiences and for cooperative and complementary actions that can be taken by participating countries.

It is a given that information and communication technologies offer development opportunities. Market forces and the activities of the private sector are fundamental but not the only imperative in terms of the development of an information society. Partnerships with Governments and the involvement of civil society are needed.

With the deployment of ICT, we are faced with two contrasting phenomena: first, a national economy stimulant; and secondly, a growing digital divide, both within countries and globally. Existing social differences are exacerbated when only one sector of the population is capable of using digital technologies. The gap cannot be reduced through the creation of an affordable infrastructure and education alone; it also requires the development of user-centred e-services. Governments, multilateral development institutions and donors play an important role in contributing to the achievement of a development strategy based on inclusiveness and participation.

The unpleasant recognition of a digital divide within each and every country should contribute to even deeper worldwide concern and to a stronger determination to address this issue very seriously and to agree on a wide range of measures, policies and actions.

Mr. Kafando (Burkina Faso) (*spoke in French*): My delegation would like at the outset fully to associate itself with the statement made yesterday from this very rostrum on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. I should like also to welcome the presence here of Mr. Abdoulaye Wade, President of the Republic of Senegal. His participation attests clearly to the importance of information and communication technologies (ICT) for Africa and in the context of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

The holding of this Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development represents an important stage in the international community's efforts to find practical solutions to the technological revolution and changing economic conditions and in particular to the problem of the digital divide.

New information and communication technologies are, as we all know, one of the pillars of globalization. History has shown that technology has always been a powerful tool in the service of human development and in the struggle against poverty. Yet, technical and technological progress that should bring nations and peoples together and create wealth for all is in stark contrast to the growing development gap between developed and developing countries. Today, in developing countries, and in Africa in particular, computers remain a luxury or a sign of prestige activity reserved only for the wealthy. Neither our public nor our private sectors have the necessary resources to use suitable technological tools or to train their staff to truly meet the challenges of development. Yet the inhabitants of the planet fervently hope that, thanks to information and communication technologies, they will be able to benefit from a higher level of knowledge and means of production better adapted to the international arena.

In this situation, one may wonder what can be done to enable countries such as Burkina Faso and all the others that have been left by the wayside to benefit from the positive spin-off of these new technologies and thus reduce the digital divide. The answer to that question should come first of all through action by countries that need to implement policies that promote innovation, development, suitable skills and access to new information and communication technologies.

Nonetheless, national policies cannot alone make up for the digital divide at the global level. International initiatives and the fair use of world trade regulations and industrial intellectual property rights should help make it possible for the poorest countries to benefit from new technologies. In that context, we welcome the creation of the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force and the Group of Eight Digital Opportunity Task Force, as well as the many other private sector initiatives throughout the world.

It would be desirable for international action in the field of new information and communication technologies to take account of the real needs of beneficiary countries, in particular the least developed ones. The low level of development in least developed countries obliges the international community to

redouble its efforts to improve the integration of these countries into world information networks through innovative and integrative projects. Such projects could be targeted at the following priority areas: to modernize administration through the widespread use of data processing, communications tools and group productivity; to support the creation of trade points that promote commercial transactions; to support education and research by setting up Internet access points in secondary schools and universities; and to set up awareness campaigns and train technicians, producers and users. Of course, for these projects to be viable, they will need the support of an appropriate national communications infrastructure.

From the very outset, Burkina Faso has integrated new communication and information technologies into its development strategy. This is why, in order to transform its vision into reality, in 1999 it drafted a national information and communication infrastructure development plan for the period 2000-2004 that provides, inter alia, for complete radio and television coverage of the national territory. Burkina Faso has also set up an asymmetrical Internet connection linking all its ministries. The country has several public and private web sites that include almost all the print media. As regards mobile telephony, for the past two years two private companies have been providing service at the national level, and this communications tool has become one of the most popular in urban centres.

All of these efforts deserve to be supported, in particular in the poorest countries, through the mobilization of funding for programmes and projects. Here, the part played by the United Nations can be decisive. Let us hope that this meeting and the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005, will make the stakeholders even more aware of the need for increased support for the poorer countries in developing new information and communication technologies as a means of combating poverty.

Mr. Adam (Israel): At the outset, my delegation would like to join other speakers in congratulating the President of the General Assembly and the Government of the Republic of Korea; both have played a significant role in drawing attention to the issue of information and communication technologies (ICT). We would also like to commend the work of the Economic and Social Council and this year's President, Ambassador Ivan Šimonović of Croatia. We wish also to thank the President of Senegal and the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union. Finally, I wish to recognize the invaluable work of the United Nations ICT Task Force and its secretariat and all other stakeholders which have taken part in our important endeavour to narrow the digital divide.

Israel is proud to be taking part in today's discussion on information and communication technologies for development. In the course of our lifetime, we have been witness to the most extraordinary technological revolution in history, one that has transformed nations, economies, cultures — indeed, the entire world. Our challenge today is to harness this incredible new power and to channel its energy into productive endeavours that benefit the whole of humanity, particularly in the areas of medicine and public health, knowledge and education, capacity-building and the public good.

And yet, as we debate the uses of high technology — personal computers, advanced telecommunications, satellite and wireless technology and the Internet — we cannot lose sight of the fact that, for most of the world's population, the mere presence of a telephone line is still a major technological phenomenon. In a world where 2 billion people live on less than one dollar a day, it is not surprising that only about 10 per cent of the world's population is connected to a telephone. In sub-Saharan Africa, the figure drops to 0.5 per cent, and we have all heard other figures mentioned by previous speakers in connection with Africa. Africa and the least developed countries are, indeed, the core of the matter.

In terms of access to personal computers, the numbers are even more dismal. While the high-income countries boast nearly 350 personal computers per 1,000 people, the rest of the world cannot muster even 40 per 1,000. In sub-Saharan Africa, there are less than 10 computers per 1,000 people. Approximately one third of the world's population has less than 15 personal computers per 1,000 people. With personal computer numbers so low, it is to be expected that figures on Internet use would be even lower. High-income countries boast an average of 610 Internet hosts per 10,000 people, while low-income countries have less than one host per 10,000 people. These numbers paint a stark picture — too many individuals in too many nations lack access to the basic tools and

infrastructure necessary for economic and social advancement.

While some nations have seen their prosperity soar during the technological revolution, most nations still lack the tools even to get airborne. Our objective here this week must be to rectify that problem and narrow the so-called digital divide, which in the modern world is a prerequisite for narrowing economic and social inequities.

Although Israel is one of the most technologically advanced countries, even in Israel we are not immune to the wide disparities between rich and poor. High-income Israelis enjoy the benefits of technology penetration at a rate 13 times higher than do low-income Israelis. Approximately one in every five Israelis is connected to the Internet. While 30 per cent of the residents of the centre of the country are connected, however, along the periphery and among minority groups that figure drops to 5 per cent.

Since 1997, Israel has been acting to minimize these differences. I would like to provide some examples. In 1997, the Government instituted a programme entitled "A computer for every child". Through that programme, more than 32,000 students in 73 low-income communities — nearly 20 per cent of all Israeli schoolchildren — have received computers.

Another major initiative is the Tapuach project, whose primary goal is to bring the Internet to low-income groups in developing neighbourhoods within each city. The programme has proved to be extremely successful, largely due to the public-private partnership that has funded and organized it.

Another project, initiated by an Israeli member of the Knesset, is the Lehava programme, aimed at narrowing social gaps by providing thousands of students with exposure to information and communication technologies. Lehava, which is the Hebrew word for "flame of knowledge", establishes community centres in low-income neighbourhoods and peripheral towns that provide computer terminals and high-speed access to the Internet. Instructors spend up to 14 hours a day working with disadvantaged young people, providing them with the essential tools they need to succeed in the information age. A total of $100 million has been allocated for this programme over the next four years.

Many technology-development projects have been conceived as bridges between Israel and its neighbours. The non-profit Peres Centre for Peace has been at the forefront of this effort, spearheading efforts to promote coexistence through technological collaboration. The Peace Technology Fund is the first international venture capital fund designed to promote private sector development in the Palestinian territories while building lasting commercial ties among Israeli, Palestinian and international companies. The Peres Centre for Peace has also been heavily involved in establishing joint programmes, such as the Jenin-Afula project and the technology park in Tulkarm. Conveniently located near to Israeli high-tech centres, the park will serve to promote joint ventures between Israelis and Palestinians. These programmes illustrate the essential need for partnership among the public and private sectors and civil society if the process is to succeed. We appreciate the role of the private sector in the organization of the working breakfast this morning.

Promoting technology education and high-tech industry is, indeed, the challenge of the modern age and an imperative for those working for the economic and social development of the poorest corners of the world. If we are to meet the Millennium Development Goals, we must address the scarcity of technological equipment and knowledge in the developing world.

More than one main actor is leading the efforts of the world community. The United Nations ICT Task Force, the World Bank's global digital initiative, the Group of Eight Digital Opportunity Task Force and the United Nations Development Programme's digital divide initiative, as well as the programmes of the International Telecommunication Union, are just a few of the programmes that have been set up. We must ensure coordination and harmonization between and among all agencies and initiatives in order to achieve maximum output.

This is the challenge that we face this week. We owe it to the millions — indeed, the billions — who still do not enjoy the benefits of even a telephone, let alone clean water and adequate food supplies, to address this disparity in a firm and resolute manner.

Mr. De Ruyt (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): I would like first of all to convey my gratitude to the President of the General Assembly for having taken the initiative of convening this meeting and for having organized it so well. Because of his determination, the

General Assembly is addressing for the first time a theme that will become increasingly central to the issue of development: the influence that information technologies will have and the efforts that we should make to ensure that that influence is positive, rather than negative.

In this respect, I would like say at the outset that we would be absolutely wrong to identify in this emerging debate only the dangers that the new information and communication technologies revolution entail for developing countries. We should not address this issue only from the perspective of what has become known as the digital divide. The exponential development of new information technologies does, indeed, involve the risk of increasing differences, and we must counter that. But the new post-industrial revolution offers new and, perhaps, spectacular ways of accelerating development.

If we consider the number of current users of telephones and computers and how much it costs to use them, it seems clear that there is a risk that such technologies will widen the gap between our States. But the current phase is a temporary one: by their very nature, these communication devices will bring us all closer to one another. The main condition for transforming what is believed to be a vicious circle into a virtuous circle is — as many speakers have said during this meeting — that we all work together to improve access for the greatest number of people.

The main challenge faced by all of us, therefore, is to put information and communication technologies in the service of sustainable development. Informatics and telematics are not merely technologies. We can and should harness their potential as a tool for transforming our societies. They can also serve as a catalyst for economic growth. The Internet fosters economic freedom, brings about change and creates new job categories. It promotes healthy competition and allows unprecedented spread of economic, commercial and technological information.

In terms of development, information technologies should be harnessed to a much greater extent as instruments of social cohesion and the fight against poverty, provided, as I said earlier, that available information is made accessible to everyone throughout the world. Distance learning makes it possible to gain low-cost access to audiences that were hitherto out of reach. By increasing the number of community Internet access centres — telecentres — it is now possible to build information feeder roads to marginalized communities. Telemedicine also has the potential for major progress across borders.

In this respect, I listened with great interest to the statement of President Wade of Senegal and to the examples that he gave of the concrete initiatives that have been taken in his country and that he suggested we might take. My country welcomes the initiative of creating an e-Africa commission as part of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which Belgium, like its European Union partners, strongly supports.

New technologies should also be a tool for good governance. By definition, the Internet implies transparency. A dynamic e-government strategy can deeply transform public administration, whether, for example, in terms of transparency and effectiveness of public procurement, or in terms of information for citizens and rationalizing and simplifying their contacts with government. In that respect, the Belgian Government has made administrative simplification one of its priorities, which in particular includes the publication of online forms. E-government can transform Kafka's ancient castle into a glass house by bringing citizens closer to the seat of power and by fostering the emergence of better informed public opinion and a more active citizenship, and thus a dynamic of participatory democracy.

New technologies are also a tool for the protection of the environment. They contribute to accelerating the transition towards a society that pollutes less and devours fewer resources, a society that is more oriented towards services and less towards industrial production. They also play a crucial role in transforming our consumption and production patterns, and are essential to ensuring access by citizens to environmental information and to spreading good environmental practices. New work practices such as distance working are harbingers of a much more rational use of our time and resources.

Our debate today is the first step in a long reflection that should lead to ambitious political conclusions commensurate with the emerging revolution at the International Telecommunication Union Summit to be held next year in Geneva and in Tunis in 2005.

What can our Governments accomplish here and now to turn information technologies into a unifying tool rather than a multiplier of inequalities at the global level? First of all, they can create and develop an environment of freedom and political, economic and legal stability that makes it possible for companies and citizens the world over to fully harness the potential of new technologies.

Basic education is also a fundamental prerequisite. We should ensure together, in accordance with the commitment adopted in the Millennium Declaration, that by the year 2015, children everywhere — boys and girls alike — will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling, and that girls and boys will have equal access to all levels of education.

Governments should also liberalize telecommunications markets without delay, so as to lower the cost of access to the Internet.

Our Governments should protect the rights of citizens to communicate, to express themselves freely and to be informed. They should also protect their right to privacy and, in particular, their right to be protected against any discrimination on the basis of medical and/or genetic data.

At the multilateral level, we should cooperate more on issues such as copyright, computer security, electronic trading standards, legal and tax questions and combating computer crime. Harmonizing practices will also help to bridge the digital divide.

Finally, as far as developed countries are concerned, we should integrate the technological dimension into our development aid strategies. In that regard, we have a lot of catching up to do. Traditional cooperation is still far from having grasped the full potential of new technologies for sustainable development. It is far from having drawn the conclusions, in terms of horizontal integration, of the technological dimension in its strategies and programmes as a tool for transforming societies, and not only as one of several technical means.

From 1 to the 5 July 2002, delegates will meet in a preparatory committee in Geneva in order to launch a long process. I hope that our debate — which I thank the President once again for having organized — will contribute to crystallising a shared vision of the emergence of an information society that is accessible and beneficial for all.

Mr. Jegermanis (Latvia): I am delighted to speak on the question of information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. Recent decades have demonstrated the profound effect these technologies have on our societies. The spread of the Internet has increased opportunities for communication and the flow of ideas, as well as created new ways to boost productivity.

The development of ICT in Latvia has contributed to the sustained economic growth of recent years, which in turn fosters rising funds for such projects as e-education and e-government. Partnerships with the private sector in either of these areas have been, and will be, crucial. An equally important step towards a more conducive ICT environment in Latvia has been the adoption of legislation related to these technologies, such as the legislation concerning electronic signatures and electronic commerce.

However, a significant part of humanity is not able to reap the benefits of ICT. Therefore, it is none too soon for the United Nations to seriously address this issue. I would like to convey our delegation's full support for the initiatives taken by the United Nations in the last several years through the Economic and Social Council and the creation of the ICT Task Force. While, as in all areas, the prime responsibility lies with the countries themselves, there are ICT areas which are characteristically international. Examples are security and privacy issues and the regulation of e-commerce, and other uses of ICT where no comprehensive results can be achieved by individual countries.

The World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunisia in 2005, will be of the utmost importance as a venue for turning the digital divide into a digital opportunity. As its formal preparatory process will start shortly, it is imperative that the full potential of this event be fully utilized from the very beginning. Both private sector and non-governmental participation in the process would be of great value to the outcome of the Summit, since experience suggests the great role that can be played by various partnerships in ICT development.

ICT is not a goal in itself, but rather a tool to advance economic, educational and cultural development. The United Nations must seize this

opportunity and utilize ICT to reach the goals set by the Member States in the Millennium Declaration.

Mr. Francese (Italy): Allow me, first of all, to express the satisfaction of my delegation for the work done here today, under the President's guidance, at this Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communications technologies (ICT). We are gathered here because information and communication technologies have proven to be one of the most powerful forces in shaping the twenty-first century. As stated by the representative of Spain on behalf of the European Union, whose intervention my delegation fully endorses, ICT affect the way people live, learn and work, as well as the way Governments work and interact with civil society. They have become a vital growth engine for the world economy, creating enormous opportunities for individuals, companies and communities throughout the world.

Italy views the information society as an instrument that should enable people to fulfil their potential and realize their aspirations. That is why we must ensure that information and communication technologies serve the mutually supportive goals of creating sustainable economic growth, enhancing public welfare and fostering social cohesion. They have the potential to strengthen democracy, increase transparency and accountability in governance, promote human rights, enhance cultural diversity, and, finally, foster international peace and stability.

Thus we must make it our job to ensure that this potential is fully realized. To meet these goals and to address emerging challenges, particularly in less industrialized countries and technically less advanced societies, we need effective national and international strategies. To that end, the Italian Government held an International Conference on E-government for Development, in cooperation with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, on 10 and 11 April last.

Bridging the digital divide within and among countries has become a critical item on our respective national agendas. Every country should have access to information and communication networks, and the Italian Government is deeply committed to the efforts being made to formulate and implement a coherent strategy to address this issue.

There is a growing recognition by industry and civil society as well of the need to bridge the divide, and we welcome that recognition. A key feature of Italy's response to this challenge, in fact, has been the mobilization of the expertise and resources of both. We are pursuing an effective partnership between government and civil society that is able to keep up with the rapid pace of technological and market development.

At the same time, we are fully aware that ICT represents an opportunity not to be missed for emerging developing economies. Countries that succeed in harnessing their potential will be able to bypass the obstacles of infrastructure development and more effectively achieve vital development goals such as poverty reduction, better health care and sanitation, and better schooling.

Information and communication technologies have helped Governments improve the quality, delivery and reliability of services to citizens and businesses alike. E-government is also crucial for narrowing the gap between developing countries and the industrialized world. Implementing effective e-government means creating a central and local government administrative system that is verifiable, efficient and effective. It implies improving the ability of Governments to respond to the information needs of their citizens and to disseminate development opportunities.

Effective e-government also means simplifying and increasing opportunities for trade and transactions between citizens and between the private sector and the government sector. Putting government services online will open up access to general information; better disseminate information on rules, laws and existing opportunities; discourage corruption; and encourage citizens, especially young people, to learn how to use basic computer systems.

Both the G-8 Digital Opportunity Task (DOT) Force and the United Nations Information and Communication Technologies Task Force have identified the vital role that e-government can play in broadening access to information technologies.

At the general summit last year, the G-8 leaders adopted a DOT Force action plan aimed at spreading government resources in order to strengthen democracy and the rule of law by empowering citizens and making the provision of central government services more efficient.

At the recent Palermo Conference on E-Government for Development, the Italian Government launched an initiative on e-government for development, aimed at promoting innovative forms of technological cooperation with developing countries based on the design and implementation of operational projects with measurable results. The initiative contributes to the dissemination of information about e-government and its programme and implementation in countries that have only partially, or not at all, exploited the full potential of this important tool.

Italy's approach entails, first, the development of a reference model for public administration digital functions and services that can subsequently be tailored to the needs and features of each country. In the model, special emphasis is placed on the management of public accounts, an area in which improvement is crucial for countries that wish to attract more official development assistance and more foreign investment. A task force has been established to design this model. Its members are experts from the civil service and non-profit organizations as well as officials of ICT companies.

Secondly, a partnership has been created with, to start, five countries — Albania, Jordan, Mozambique, Nigeria and Tunisia — to implement specific e-government projects in the priority areas indicated by the countries themselves. We are currently working with those countries to define e-government operational projects that are focused on each one's organizational priorities and specific requirements. The possibility to expand the partnership of the countries will be considered in the near future.

Thirdly, Italy's approach involves the promotion of an action plan on how e-government can strengthen democracy and the rule of law, giving citizens a central position and improving the delivery of essential public services.

I should like to inform the Assembly that the response of the international community to this initiative was very positive. An increasing number of countries have applied for assistance to introduce the reference model and apply it towards the modernization of their public administrations. The World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the European Commission all have expressed their support for its objectives. On the basis of that response, Italy will submit a specifically tailored plan of action on e-government to the next G-8 summit.

Finally, we cannot underestimate the challenge of bridging the digital divide. Gaps in basic economic and social infrastructures such as electricity, telecommunications and education still represent a major obstacle, but we cannot let the complexity of the challenge be a pretext for inaction. There is only one road to take: concrete action to achieve concrete results. We appeal to other countries to join our efforts and work in the same constructive spirit to ensure that new technologies truly benefit all of humankind.

Mr. Musambachime (Zambia): On behalf of my delegation, I wish to commend the President for convening this important plenary Meeting devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT).

My delegation would like to associate itself with the statement made on behalf of the Group of 77 and China by the Vice-Minister for Science and Technology of Venezuela, Mr. Rudolf Römer.

This Meeting is most opportune, coming at a time when the United Nations has put in place the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force. My delegation is pleased that the meeting is being held in accordance with General Assembly resolution 56/258 of 31 January 2002, as well as resolution 56/183 of 21 December 2001, in which the Assembly welcomed the fact that the World Summit on the Information Society would be held in December 2003 in Geneva and in December 2005 in Tunis.

My delegation is most encouraged by the fact that the Task Force brings together Government representatives, the United Nations system, the private sector, non-governmental organizations and academic society. We are pleased also that the Meeting is addressing the digital divide in the context of globalization and the development process, and is promoting coherence and synergy between regional and international information and communication technologies initiatives.

My delegation welcomes the measures aimed at enhancing the promotion of ICT technologies, particularly in Africa. Zambia took note of the Secretary-General's report on the role of the ICT task force. The Secretary-General noted that the Task Force should set bold targets and goals with specific time-frames and carry out stakeholder campaigns to

mobilize Governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, academics and local communities to achieve these goals, bringing the best and most valuable talent to bear on these efforts. While striving for longer-term goals, the Task Force should also aim at short-term wins with tangible and visible results.

My delegation concurs with the Chairman of the United Nations ICT Task Force, who noted that ICT has unquestionably become one of the key development challenges for Africa. There is need for strong partnerships and knowledge- and information-sharing mechanisms to meet the challenges. There is certainly a need in Africa to secure political will at the highest possible level for optimizing the opportunities in an information and knowledge age for political, social, financial and cultural development.

Despite their limitations, many African countries have embraced information and communication technologies. Electronic mail has been adopted by almost every agency with international communication needs. In some countries, Internet use is cheap enough to allow the exchange and transmission of valuable market information. The Internet is also being increasingly used for distance education. Students are able to use the World Wide Web to seek information and obtain advice and reading materials. Farmers are also benefiting by accessing information on inputs, pest control and markets. Nurses operating in villages use digital cameras to download and transfer images of patients' symptoms to nearby towns for examination by doctors. Doctors are using telemedicine to seek advice, learn about new techniques of treating certain diseases and exchange information between rural and urban hospitals. Governments are also using information technology to inform the public and accelerate the flow of information between ministries. Parliaments are tapping into it to keep up with developments in various parts of the world.

Some countries in sub-Saharan Africa are using the new technologies as a means of enhancing other activities. For example, coastal countries are increasingly using the Internet for surveillance, control and protection of fisheries. There are approaches involving radical changes in attitudes, as well as the incorporation of new research to make learning more effective. There are also many other uses, such as in banking, weather forecasting, crime detection, accessing libraries, commerce, e-development and in the information and telecommunication sectors.

We would like to commend the United Nations for introducing a programme to promote digital technology in sub Saharan-Africa and to bridge the divide. Technological transformation hinges on the ability of each country to unleash the creativity of its people, thus enabling them to access, learn, understand, appreciate and master the new technology, to innovate and to adapt it to their needs and capacities.

With the Government's policy of encouraging investment in telecommunications, cellular telephone systems in my country have been expanding. A number of players in this field have been assisted in opening up telecommunications. As a member of the International Telecommunications Satellite Organization, Zambia has an earth station in Lusaka that provides direct telephone, telefax, e-mail and television links with the rest of the world. The Zambia Telecommunications Company remains the major provider of all types of telecommunication services throughout the country. The vast majority of the exchanges are already automatic.

Another landmark development in Zambia's telecommunications network took place on 10 June 2002 with the launching by one of the service providers of an international roaming network for making and receiving calls on the global system for mobile telecommunications (GSM). This network will enable people visiting and living in Zambia to connect with other countries.

In conclusion, my delegation welcomes more investment in telecommunications, in line with what the Secretary-General said in his report on the ICT Task Force: "The challenge is not solely to bridge the existing global 'digital divide', but to avert the prospect of its rapidly growing wider." (*E/2001/7, para. 40*)

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.